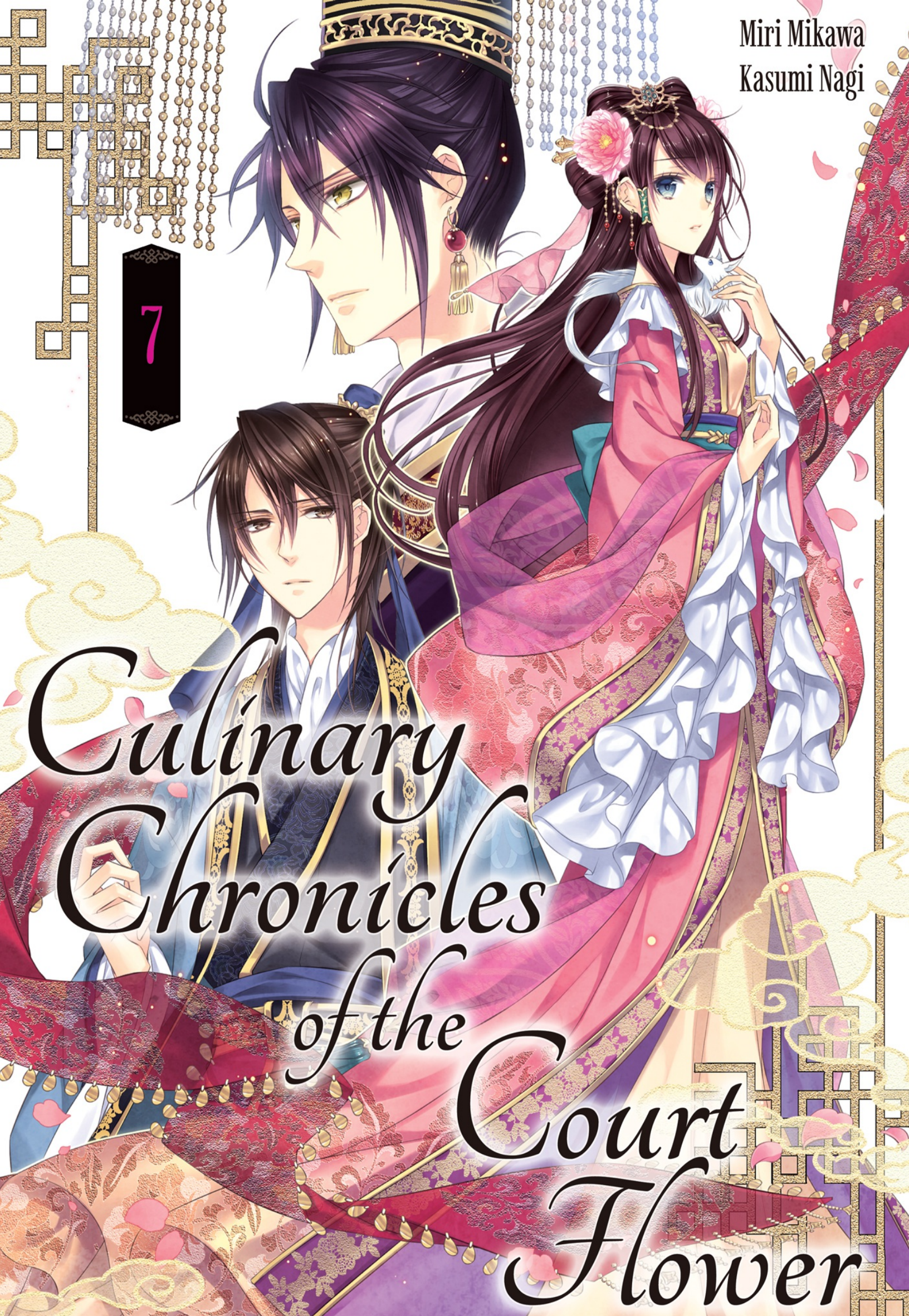




Miri Mikawa
Kasumi Nagi

7

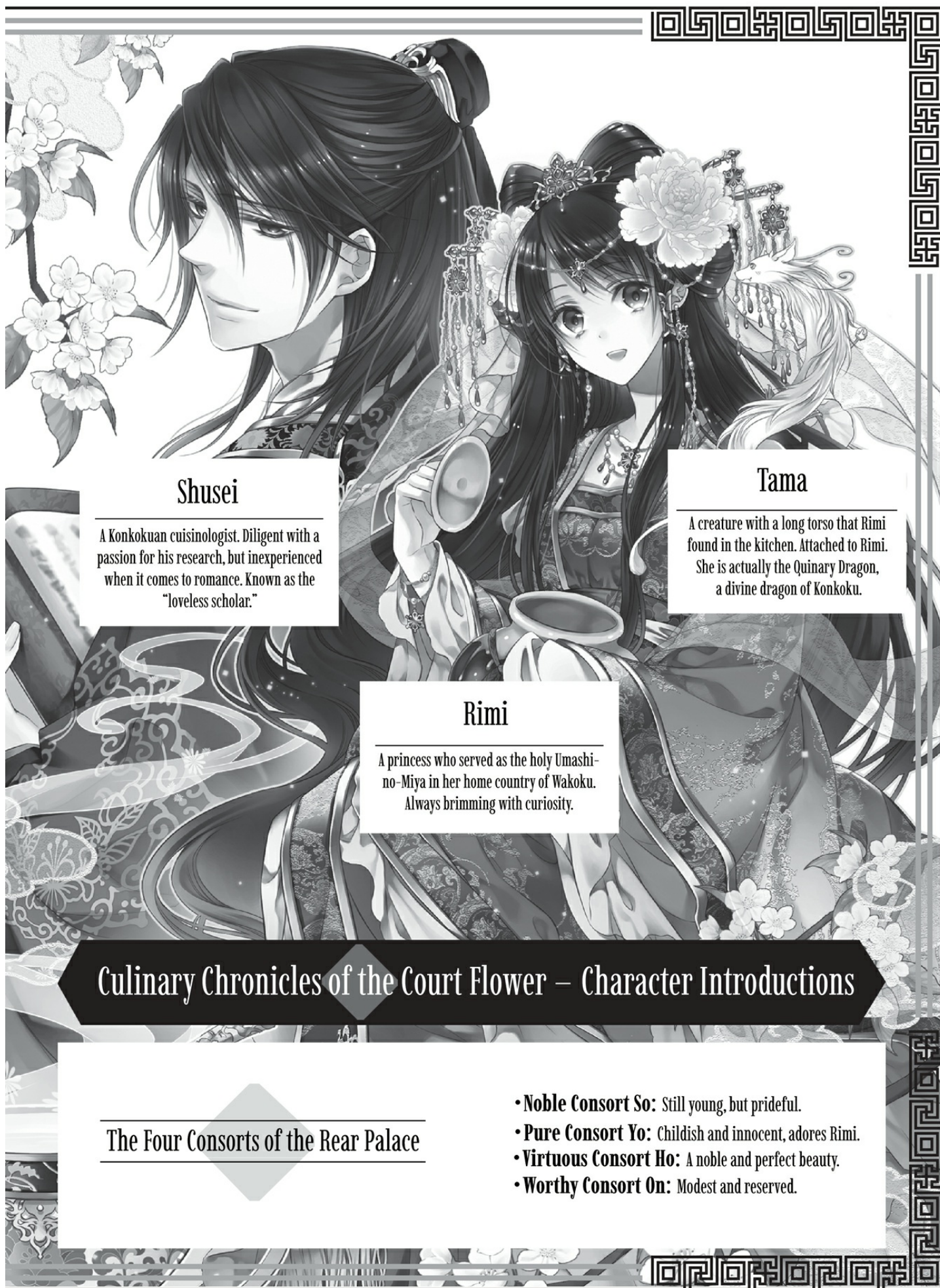
*Culinary
Chronicles
of the
Court
Flower*



Miri Mikawa
Kasumi Nagi

7

*Culinary
Chronicles
of the Court
Flower*



Shusei

A Konkoku cuisineologist. Diligent with a passion for his research, but inexperienced when it comes to romance. Known as the “loveless scholar.”

Tama

A creature with a long torso that Rimi found in the kitchen. Attached to Rimi. She is actually the Quinary Dragon, a divine dragon of Konkoku.

Rimi

A princess who served as the holy Umashi-no-Miya in her home country of Wakoku. Always brimming with curiosity.

Culinary Chronicles of the Court Flower – Character Introductions

The Four Consorts of the Rear Palace

- **Noble Consort So:** Still young, but prideful.
- **Pure Consort Yo:** Childish and innocent, adores Rimi.
- **Virtuous Consort Ho:** A noble and perfect beauty.
- **Worthy Consort On:** Modest and reserved.



Jotetsu

A military officer who serves
as Shohi's bodyguard.



Hakurei

An enchantingly beautiful eunuch.
Serves Shohi directly.



Shohi

The emperor of the great empire
of Konkoku. Cruel and heartless.

Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Character Introductions](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1: A Month of Open Arms](#)

[Chapter 2: The Jewel of Saisha](#)

[Chapter 3: A Night of Secrets, a Chance Meeting of Enemies](#)

[Chapter 4: In the Rear Palace](#)

[Chapter 5: After Her!](#)

[Chapter 6: What is the Taste of Freedom?](#)

[Chapter 7: The Festival of Fulfillment](#)

[Afterword](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)

The sitar sang its sharp, quivering song, and the girl danced as if commanded by it. The music took everything in her soul and made it physical. It cleansed her mind of every unnecessary thought and drove her into an ecstatic dance where only the joy of movement held sway.

For as long as the girl could remember, she had copied the moves of her mother, who had been a dancing girl. Dancing brought praise and joy, so the girl danced more and more. When she was dancing, she could forget her surroundings. All the sneers, all the glares, all the scornful words, both whispered and shouted, were utterly washed away.

By age six, she had become a dancer who could dazzle anyone.

One day, her uncle, Gulzari Shar, had come to her looking perplexed. He had seen her dance and wanted to ask a question.

“You dance so marvelously! Why don’t you try to dance at the court banquets? You would enchant everyone there. The emperor would be so proud to have his daughter dance at his banquets.”

“I don’t dance to show off. I dance for myself,” the young girl had said as she hugged her wryly smiling uncle tightly.

His tight-fitting attire, covered with endless silver embroidery, had felt so smooth on her skin. He smelled of the sea. He’d only just returned from a journey at the time. She had nuzzled against her uncle, coaxing out a light, jangling sound from the intricate gold and jewels that adorned her ears, brow, and neck. She had wished that she could absorb his smell, replacing the perfume scent of the court that stained her hair. It was the smell of freedom.

“Then why did you let me watch you dance?” he had asked.

“I wanted to dance, so I danced. I won’t dance if someone asks me to. And you’re not like other people, Uncle,” she’d explained. “I wish I could go somewhere far away with you. I want to look out at the open sky and go wherever I please. I want to enjoy life and dance only when I wish to. It would be so wonderful.”

Gulzari Shar was friendly, kind, and so delicately beautiful. Maybe it was because of the journeys he made to the Southern Trinity under his brother’s

orders, or maybe it was his youth, but he had a breezy openness about him that other royals lacked. He carried the scents and styles of distant, unknown lands.

“Aisha, you are both lovely and a marvelous dancer. What’s more, you are my brother’s only daughter. Of all the women in Saisha, you will shine brightest, both in name and reality. You shouldn’t go running off on foolish adventures like your uncle. Do you understand?” Shar had asked.

“I don’t care whether I should or shouldn’t! I want to!” Aisha had said, petulantly raising her voice and drawing a frown from her uncle.

She’d hated the court. It felt impossible to breathe constantly surrounded by so many eyes and entangling schemes. Ever since Aisha was little, she’d dreamed of being able to escape the court and live freely, to go where she wanted and dance when she wanted.

Seven years passed, and she became a beautiful woman known as the Jewel of Saisha. Yet her yearning for freedom never left her.

Chapter 1: A Month of Open Arms

I

Sweat was dripping down Setsu Rimi's chest as she walked.

"Aaaah, it's so hot! Still, summer's the reason we can do things like this!" she said with a smile as she strolled along the walkway leading from the Palace of the Water Spirit.

Rimi reverently carried a tray atop which sat teacups made of glass. She had never seen such a thing until she'd come to Konkoku, and she was ecstatic at the idea of being able to try using one.

On Rimi's shoulder sat little Tama, the divine Quinary Dragon that conferred upon the emperor of Konkoku the right to rule.

What are you so happy about? her little blue eyes seemed to ask as she sniffed inquisitively at Rimi's cheek.

The dragon had a coat of fine silvery fur. One could see a pair of little horns between her ears, peeking up through the fur. She had little claws like a bird's and clutched in one of her little forepaws was a string of tiny pearls. Everything about her was smooth and warm to the touch. Everything but her cold, wet nose.

"I'll let you drink some too, Tama! I think it's delicious," Rimi said.

It had been a year and a few months since Rimi had joined the rear palace and had her name changed to Setsu. When she'd first arrived, she had been made a concubine with the rank of Lady of Precious Bevy. Now, she was considered a distant relative of the Shu House in the process of becoming empress. During this transition, she was kept in the Palace of the Water Spirit.

The trees were thick with beautiful green leaves, through which cicadas could be heard buzzing. Between the noise of the cicadas, the clouds of dust, and the heat, many people considered summer to be a miserable time.

However, the Palace of the Water Spirit was where the emperor usually summered. Thanks to the Jade Spring located at the center of the palace, the wind was still cool. The spring was fed by water from deep underground, which meant the water temperature never rose. Whenever the breeze passed through the rooms and along the walkways, it brought the Jade Spring's refreshing chill with it.

A gazebo sat alongside the spring, which was where Rimi expected the fifth emperor of Konkoku, Ryu Shohi, to be waiting for her. Shohi's arrival had been sudden and unannounced, but Rimi had immediately put together a summer treat for him. It meant keeping the emperor waiting, but only for a bit.

I'm sure he's going to love this since the heat has gotten so intense. His Majesty has barely had a moment to rest since summer began. Hopefully, this will bring him a little relief.

Earlier that summer, a group of provincial officials, led by Kan Cho'un, had clashed with Shohi. The young emperor had narrowly managed to navigate the issue, but his approach ended up putting him in conflict with officials in the central government.

Dissatisfaction was mounting amid the generals, the Ministry of War, and the Ministry of Justice. There were also ominous rumors that the Ho House was regularly contacting the disaffected officials, plotting with them to force the emperor to abdicate.

All of them were rallying around Ho Shusei.

Pain lanced through Rimi's heart at the thought, but she lectured herself to try to quell her emotions.

Master Shusei said he's prepared for everything to come. That means he's my enemy. And I'm prepared too.

As the gazebo came into sight, Tama squeaked and climbed from Rimi's shoulder onto one of the walkway's supporting pillars.

Rimi, wondering what was wrong, followed the dragon's line of sight to the gazebo where she realized someone else was with Shohi. Tama seemed shocked, and Rimi's eyes widened as well.

“Isn’t that the Minister of Rites?” Rimi wondered.

She was able to make out the slender face of Jin Keiyu, Minister of Rites. He wore his characteristic smile, one that made him seem more irreverent than kind. Even as he sat before the emperor, he seemed to speak teasingly.

Shohi, however, looked surly. But with those thick eyelashes; sharp, alluring eyes; and the graceful line of his jaw, he was shockingly beautiful even when wearing a sour expression. Maybe it was the illumination of the fierce summer light, but his beauty seemed to stand out more than ever.

Is something the matter? Why is he with the Minister of Rites?

Rimi, slightly uneasy, approached the table where they were waiting.

“I’m sorry to keep you waiting, Your Majesty. And you, Minister of Rites. Your arrival was so sudden, it took me some time to prepare,” she apologized, kneeling.

“It’s fine,” Shohi remarked casually. Keiyu simply smiled.

Rimi placed the tray on the table and set out teacups for Shohi and Keiyu. The sight spurred Shohi to lean forward in curiosity.

“What’s this?” he asked.

Rimi had set out small glass teacups for the pair. Alongside them, she placed a small glass pitcher with a net of woven bamboo sitting atop it. The net held aromatic tea leaves and crushed ice from the icehouse. As the ice melted, it absorbed the flavor of the tea leaves. Drip by drip, golden tea filled the bottom of the pitcher.

“It’s iced tea. It’s not at all bitter or astringent. You’ll find it mellow and delicious. It does take some time to make, though,” she explained.

The ice quickly melted, and once it had stopped dripping, Rimi removed the net from the pitcher. She then filled their cups with the accumulated tea. Shohi and Keiyu each took a drink and stared at their cups in astonishment.

“It’s good!” Shohi said.

“Wow!” Keiyu added to the emperor’s blunt declaration. “It’s not bitter at all. That goes down easy.”

Rimi smiled broadly, delighted to see them enjoying the drink.

“You see? This is exactly what I mean, Your Majesty. And that’s why I hope you’ll grant my request,” Keiyu said cryptically.

“Mm,” Shohi grunted with a sullen expression.

Rimi tilted her head in confusion.

Keiyu set down his teacup and looked up at her with a playful glint in his eyes.

“I’ll come right out with it. I came here today because, well, the truth is...I told His Majesty I want you,” he said.

“What?!” Rimi cried, shrinking backward.

Keiyu burst into laughter as he watched the color drain from her face. Shohi looked disgusted.

“Stop trying to give her the wrong impression,” Shohi commanded. “What he means is that he wants your assistance with something. But you’re in the middle of your enthronement. I’m not interested in bothering you with trivialities, even for a short while.”

“Trivialities?! Trivialities?! Your Majesty, this is important! A dream dating back to the founding of Konkoku lies in the balance. You of all people must realize that?” Keiyu said.

“Umm, what’s all this about?” Rimi asked, puzzled by the conversation.

Shohi motioned for her to sit.

“Are you aware of what happens during the month of Qi?” he asked once she was seated.

Rimi thought back on what she’d learned in preparation for her Executive Audience.

The Konkokuan calendar was divided into twelve months, each named after a creature of some kind: Feng, the male phoenix; Huang, the female phoenix; Gui, the turtle; Shen, the shelled dragon; Hu, the tiger; Long, the dragon; Qi, the male qilin; Lin, the female qilin; and so on. In Wakoku, Qi was known as Hazuki, the month of leaves. The month in question had actually just begun.

“Qi is a month of diplomacy, right? Konkoku’s vassals and diplomatic partners all gather, of course, but for this month, even lands that have no diplomatic ties to Konkoku can come to discuss diplomatic issues,” Rimi recalled.

Envoys would surely be coming from Wakoku as well, seeking to meet the emperor. The year before, Rimi had entrusted an envoy with a letter for her Saigu sister. But now, the Wakokuan palace girl Setsu Rimi was gone. Rimi was officially a Konkokuan. There would be no more letters to Wakoku. A sudden pang of sadness overcame her, but she hurriedly buried the feeling.

“With so many visitors from different lands, it’s a busy time for the outer palace, right? The Ministry of Rites especially,” Rimi added.

“Since it’s an annual affair, Vice Minister En usually takes care of things for me, so I’m generally not that busy. This year’s different, though. I have to actually put my head down and take care of things personally,” Keiyu said with annoyance. He waved a hand like he was shooing a fly.

“Which brings us to the main point: an envoy has come from Saisakoku on a diplomatic mission,” Shohi said.

Recognition flashed through Rimi’s mind.

“A mission from Saisakoku? Shar and Shuri are coming back?!” she cried.

“Precisely. I’ve been looking forward to seeing Prince Shar again, but now more than ever. A diplomatic envoy from Saisakoku during Qi means they are prepared to begin serious diplomatic negotiations. Our empire’s prestige hinges on how they are welcomed,” the emperor explained.

“That’s why I thought I’d ask if you could work with me,” Keiyu added. “I heard you’re close with Prince Shar, so I was wondering if you would help me entertain him?”

“Of course I will!” Rimi said.

Rimi had been living in limbo. With the enthronement ceremony postponed and no idea when it would resume, she was kept cloistered away in the Palace of the Water Spirit. She had no duties or responsibilities. Helping the Minister of Rites sounded far more entertaining than wasting her days in the palace.

Shohi seemed surprised by Rimi's immediate response.

"You're going to be empress. You really have no qualms about entertaining guests, no matter how important they might be? What's more, you'd be a government official's assistant. That wouldn't wound your pride?" he asked.

"If we can't give our important guests the most wonderful hospitality, *Konkoku's* pride would be wounded. Besides, it's what I love to do," Rimi insisted.

Her cheerful response drew widened eyes from Shohi and a grin from Keiyu.

"She said it herself, Your Majesty. I assume I have your permission?" the minister asked.

After a long sigh, Shohi nodded sullenly. He understood the necessity, but clearly, deep down, he didn't want to.

The emperor fixed Keiyu with a sharp glare.

"Fine. But in return, you are to hurry the Nocturnal Liturgy along. It is unfair to make Rimi continue to wait. Make it happen before the end of Qi," Shohi commanded.

Rimi's body went tense.

The Nocturnal Liturgy. The night I spend with His Majesty and emerge as empress.

Though she'd readied herself for it, she was still afraid. Even so, she was happy the emperor was concerned for her sake.

"I'm not sure what Chancellor Shu would have to say about that. He was the one who suggested postponing things indefinitely to avoid creating friction with the Ho House's master, Shusei. You agreed to it yourself," Keiyu said. "To do this during Qi, of all times, would—"

"That's exactly why now is the time. Shusei knows as well as anyone how important Qi is. If the envoys learned that there was turmoil in our court, they might use it as an opportunity to force us into unreasonable treaties. In a worst-case scenario, it could even mean other powers seizing territory from us. If Shusei truly desires the throne, he won't want his future domain to be

threatened by foreign powers,” Shohi explained.

“You’re not wrong,” Keiyu admitted.

“That’s why I intend to establish a truce with Shusei during the month of Qi. He’s a clever man. He’ll know it’s the right choice. In the meantime, I’ll make him approve the Nocturnal Liturgy. Inform the chancellor of that,” Shohi said.

“You really think you can make Shusei approve?” Keiyu asked.

Rimi hung her head.

There’s nothing for you to worry about, Minister. Master Shusei won’t hesitate to accept.

Shusei had no intention of acting like he desired Rimi now. The moment they had declared each other enemies, they had silently agreed it would be the end of acting warmly toward each other.

The wheels of fate have started turning, Lady Saigu.

Rimi clenched her hands atop her lap and bit her lip slightly.

“What’s wrong, Rimi? Not happy with His Majesty’s proposal?” Keiyu said as he peered at her.

“No, no! Of course not! I’m delighted that His Majesty is concerned for me!” Rimi said in a panic.

“Hmm. I see,” the minister said with an enigmatic smile. He then turned back to Shohi and bowed. “Very well, Your Majesty. If you can obtain Shusei and the chancellor’s approval, I will use my powers as Minister of Rites to make the Nocturnal Liturgy happen quickly. Whatever the case, starting today, Rimi will be assisting me.”

II

Shusei was unsurprised when a messenger arrived stating that Shohi was summoning him to the palace. If anything, he was surprised it had taken so long.

Since becoming master of the Ho House, Shusei had served as a beacon for the discontented powers opposed to the emperor. Shusei already knew why he was being summoned.

It was Qi, and an important one at that.

The report from Mars appears to be true. This is a milestone toward true diplomatic relations. Konkoku's hundred-year wish may finally come true.

A few days before, Shusei had received word from Mars that Saisakoku was sending a delegation during Qi. Mars, the masked man who had been working for years to place a Ho on the throne, always delivered fast and accurate information. While it was unclear who he was, at the very least, it could be assumed that he had access to the imperial court.

He's too sharp for his own good, so I need to make sure I use him while I can. Once I no longer require his intelligence, he'll just be a thorn in my side. When that time comes, I'll need to eliminate him quickly. Which means I need to learn who he really is.

The sound of cicadas assailed Shusei as he crossed the walkway leading to the Hall of the Rising Dragon's gate. A guardsman delivered word to someone inside the gate, and Shin Jotetsu emerged to meet the scholar.

"So you came, Lord Ho," Jotetsu said with a grin. The man had a rough edge, and his smile gave the impression of a wolf wearing human skin.

"I was called, wasn't I?" Shusei replied curtly, following the bodyguard inside.

"How's your plan working out?" Jotetsu asked without looking back.

"There's nothing about it that I can share with a loyal subject of His Imperial Majesty," Shusei said.

"You're breaking my heart. Don't you ever get tired of playing the tough guy? Nobody would blame you if you just shrugged your shoulders and said 'I'm done.' Just snatch Rimi and run off to Saisakoku," Jotetsu retorted.

"Did you just tell me to 'snatch' the empress-to-be? You're as insane as ever," Shusei said with some surprise.

Jotetsu finally turned around, grinning at Shusei's shock.

“Aren’t you wondering why I’m saying that?” he asked.

“I’m sorry, but I *truly* do not care,” Shusei replied.

Jotetsu sank his shoulders, making a big show of how hurt his feelings were.

“Well, I don’t care if you don’t care, I’m telling you anyway. You and His Majesty are both important to me.”

“If that’s true, you’ll shut up and just watch,” Shusei replied curtly.

Jotetsu gave a small sigh just as they stopped in front of the emperor’s chambers.

“The master of the Ho House has arrived,” he announced, kneeling in the doorway.

“Enter,” Shohi ordered.

As they stepped inside, Shusei found someone unexpected waiting for him.

Rimi? Why is she here?

Toward the back of the room was Shohi, sitting on his sofa with one knee raised in an arrogant pose. Chancellor Shu Kojin stood beside him. The man many called Kojin’s right hand, Minister of Revenue To Rihan, was standing off to the side near the wall. Alongside him was Jin Keiyu, Minister of Rites. And standing quietly just behind him, as if she was his attendant, was Rimi.

Though she kept her head low, she glanced toward Shusei. Their eyes met.

She is my enemy.

As their gazes collided, Rimi’s expression stiffened. Shusei’s jaw tightened. They had declared each other enemies. They both understood that. Now, they needed to behave like it.

“I am here by your command, Your Majesty. Did you need something?” Shusei asked with a smile as he gave a small bow.

Shusei felt like he was alone behind enemy lines, but he’d expected that when he’d been called. He wasn’t shaken. Rimi’s presence was a surprise, but he had quickly collected himself.

“I imagine you already know, Shusei. Let’s not play games. Today is the first

day of Qi. Delegations from our friends and vassals will begin arriving before long,” Shohi said. “You already know what I’m going to ask, right?”

“You would like to maintain friendly relations with the Ho House for the month. Am I correct?” Shusei guessed.

“Good, we can be quick about this. That’s right. What say you?” the emperor asked.

“I think it would benefit both of us. Was that all? If so, I’ll excuse myself.”

“That’s all,” Shohi confirmed.

“Farewell then,” Shusei said and turned to leave. As he headed for the door, Shohi suddenly called out.

“Ah! I nearly forgot.”

Shusei stopped in place and turned back around.

“I just wanted to let you know, I’ll be unavailable on the eleventh day of Qi. I plan on holding my Nocturnal Liturgy with Rimi,” Shohi added nonchalantly.

Shusei couldn’t help himself from glancing toward Rimi at the mention of the Nocturnal Liturgy, but she was hanging her head in embarrassment.

Using Qi, when both of them knew they couldn’t afford to take action against one another, to pursue the Nocturnal Liturgy was a clever strategy. No matter how furious Shusei might be, he was unable to take any action, and once he was able to move against Shohi again, it would be too late. Rimi would be well and truly his. Perhaps the intention was to anger Shusei in retaliation for the Ho House’s attack on the emperor.

Kojin, Rihan, and Keiyu were all watching Shusei, waiting for him to react. Waiting to laugh as he crumbled.

Is this revenge for inciting the central government officials? Bringing me here, showing me Rimi, and declaring that the Nocturnal Liturgy would go forward... Father— Chancellor Shu, I know this is your doing.

Shohi wouldn’t enjoy such cruelty. But it was likely that Kojin had suggested this as a condition for him to help move forward the Nocturnal Liturgy. The chancellor had always enjoyed employing these sorts of methods upon Shusei.

The evidence was the disgust he could see in Shohi's eyes and the slight curl of Kojin's lips. It was as if the man was just waiting to sneer at him.

"What happy news. Congratulations," Shusei said with a bright smile, bowing to Shohi and Rimi. When Rimi looked up in shock and their eyes met, his smile deepened. "I hope your ceremony proceeds without incident, Rimi."

"Thank you," Rimi replied with a quiver in her voice.

Shusei turned around to leave. He bit his lip softly, feeling Kojin's dissatisfied glare burning on his back.

I want Rimi to be empress. That much is true...

Still, for some reason, it hurt to breathe. Jotetsu, who stood by the doorway, gave Shusei a knowing look, but he ignored it and walked past him.

That's why he told me to grab Rimi and run. It was a way of warning me, to try to keep me from getting upset.

Jotetsu was stuck in an awkward position between Shusei and Shohi. He was trying to navigate it in his own way.

As Shusei crossed the walkway leading from the Hall of the Rising Dragon, he breathed a small sigh. He truly believed this would all lead to Rimi's happiness.



I really didn't want to do that, but Shusei remained calm. Maybe it wasn't that cruel after all?

Shohi breathed a sigh of relief as he watched Shusei leave.

Of course, Kojin had said when Shohi insisted on the Nocturnal Liturgy going forward. But Rimi needs to be there when you tell the master of the Ho House. I want to watch him squirm.

Shohi had protested, claiming that he didn't see the point of it. But Kojin had insisted that the emperor would look weak if he let Shusei stir up the officials without so much as returning fire. Rihan and Keiyu had approved of the idea as well. And so, Shohi had relented and gone through with it. But it appeared that Shusei was beyond their games.

Does Shusei not really care about Rimi? He claimed to want Rimi as part of his

rivalry with me, but maybe he has no actual attachment to her.

He would never have been able to congratulate them so calmly otherwise.

Well, I can breathe easier now. For the next month, at least.

The court officials' anger would continue to fester, and they might still make moves in the shadows to push for Shohi's abdication. But for the next month, while foreign eyes were upon them, there would be no blatant attacks.

Shohi had long been concerned about keeping Rimi waiting for so long. As the four consorts had urged him, he wanted to do everything within his power to keep her close. Just having her around put the young emperor at ease. She was as comforting as a warm spring day. He wanted her to wrap him in her arms and hold him.

He wanted her to stay by his side forever.



"What happy news."

The words seemed so cold when Shusei had uttered them. But Rimi knew they weren't words of indifference but of conviction. She understood it would be wrong to lament over it, so instead, she gathered her strength and lifted her head.

I can't let myself be shaken by a ritual I already knew was coming. I've been given an important duty. I have to rise to meet it, for His Majesty's sake.

As Rimi looked up, she saw Kojin glaring hatefully at Shusei as the scholar departed.

Chancellor Shu, why do you hate Shusei so much? Did you really hate Ho Seishu that strongly? What happened between you two?

The mystery ate at her.

The following morning, Rimi received an order from Keiyu to report to the Ministry of Rites. With Shohi's permission, it seemed the minister was ready to put her fully to use.

She left the Palace of the Water Spirit and arrived at the Ministry of Rites just

as the morning sun was beginning to crest the horizon. In spite of the season, the air was brisk and the world was glistening with morning dew. Other court officials had risen with the sun, though the higher ranking ones tended to show up later.

Rimi made for the minister's chambers, having been told to report there first thing in the morning. She was already familiar with the complex from the days she'd spent in the cuisinology hall with Shusei as the room was tucked away in a corner of the Ministry of Rites. Even so, the ministry was composed of more than ten buildings. These were connected by a complex series of walkways, making the place feel rather maze-like.

She relied on the posted signs to guide her. After a few turns back and forth, she arrived in front of an impressive and stately wooden door adorned with a circular window of cast iron scrollwork.

These were the chambers of the Minister of Rites. The room, and the area around it, were still utterly silent.

Master Keiyu's an important official, so he probably hasn't started work yet.

Rimi slipped in quietly. She let out a small cry upon finding somebody there already, sprawled out in front of the table.

"Be quiet," the man grunted in annoyance, causing Rimi to clap her hands over her mouth.

"Wait, Minister of Revenue?! Why are you here? This is the office of the Minister of Rites," she said.

To Rihan, the Minister of Revenue, crossed his arms and glared at Rimi, contorting the scar beneath his right eye.

"Chancellor Shu ordered me to play chaperone. He said we'd never be able to look at His Majesty again if a clerk laid a hand on the empress-to-be, even for an instant," he said.

"Laid a hand on me? Who would?" Rimi asked, puzzled.

To Rihan's eyebrows raised in exasperated anger.

"That's exactly the kind of cavalier attitude the chancellor is worried about,

you imbecile!”

“I-I-I’m sorry!” Rimi cried, cowering in place. “...But still, who would?”

“Keiyu, who else? What I don’t understand is why I’m the one saddled with this job. Then again, the only one who can keep Keiyu in line is me. We’re both ministers, so it seems like I’m stuck with him,” Rihan spat.

“If you hate it that much, you can always leave,” someone said brightly.

Rimi looked back at the entrance to find Keiyu leaning in the doorway with a smirk on his face.

III

Keiyu’s shenyi swayed as he strode into the room.

“I know things are busy at the Ministry of Revenue as well. You don’t need to spend time here on my account,” he said.

“The entire reason we’re busy is because creating and funding your ministry’s emergency budget for Qi has made a mountain of work for us. The Ministry of Rites is at fault. Or rather, *you’re* at fault. And now I have to be a watchdog?” Rihan grumbled.

“Like I said, you can always just go,” Keiyu said to Rihan before shifting his attention. “And hello there, Rimi! Glad to see you came. And looking adorable as ever.”

As he passed Rimi, he ran his hand gently across her chin. The move was so natural that she was more dazed than shocked by it.

“You really expect me to go ‘Oh, nothing to worry about then,’ and leave after that little display?” Rihan said, glowering.

“What? Did I do something wrong?” Keiyu asked innocently.

It wasn’t clear if he was playing dumb or honestly didn’t know, but either way, Keiyu casually walked past Rimi and Rihan to immediately shuffle through the mountain of papers on his desk.

“The chancellor assigned you here because he wants the Saisakokuan delegation handled by two ministers,” Keiyu continued as his eyes raced back and forth across the papers. “Being received by the Minister of Rites is already a hospitable welcome, but having the minister involved with financial affairs there would be exceptionally hospitable. He wants to convey how happy Konkoku is to receive them. Surely you already gathered that much, Rihan?”

“I don’t like it. It’ll show favoritism. You’re the minister in charge of foreign diplomacy, so you tell me, do you think that’s a good idea?” Rihan asked.

“The other delegations know as well as we do that Saisakoku is a special case. And *you* ‘don’t like it’? Why, because you just *love* fairness? I never thought I’d see the day that To Rihan complained about the chancellor’s way of doing things.”

As Rimi listened to the conversation, she realized what Kojin had intended and just how thorough the chancellor was. Of course he wouldn’t assign Rihan as a mere chaperone.

But wow, I guess he’s the Minister of Rites for a reason.

Despite his frivolous demeanor, Keiyu was swiftly reviewing papers even as he bantered with Rihan. It was like he had two minds, able to think about entirely different things at once. Rimi couldn’t help but be amazed. She’d thought only Shusei was capable of something like that.

“Oh, I’m losing my patience with the chancellor. He stands around with his arms crossed while anger toward His Majesty grows within the court. The ministers of Justice and War are openly critical of the emperor!” Rihan said grimly. “Just watch the new Minister of Personnel criticize His Majesty too. The ministries will be split right down the middle.”

At the Executive Audience, the previous Minister of Personnel had joined forces with I Bunryo, the director of the rear palace. In the end, he’d fled the country to escape his crimes. After that, the court officials had set about selecting a new minister. The issue was that the emperor and chancellor couldn’t make unilateral decisions where the election of ministers was concerned. The emperor had the final say, of course, but if he chose someone too unpopular, it would only create more resentment.

Politics are so complicated.

Just listening to the conversation was making Rimi depressed.

After sifting through dozens of documents, Keiyu moved to the table and sat next to Rihan.

“You don’t think Chancellor Shu will find a good compromise when it comes to choosing the new minister?” Keiyu asked. “Well, whatever the case, what matters right now is pleasing the delegation from Saisakoku. If we can establish diplomatic ties with them, it’ll boost His Majesty’s reputation and take the wind out of his opponents’ sails. Rimi, sit. Please, take a look at this. Rihan, you too.”

Keiyu laid papers out on the table for them to see. They were documents prepared by the Ministry of Rites covering things like a schedule of events for Qi and outlines for meals and entertainment for the Saisakokuan delegation.

The question is how happy we can make the Saisakokuans before they return home. If we do well, it’ll strengthen His Majesty’s position.

Rimi had been tasked with an important duty. It was sobering. She turned her attention to the schedule that listed plans in great detail.

It had already begun, but for the first half of Qi, delegations from small vassal states like Wakoku would arrive in Annei and lodge at inns and restaurants in the city. Then they would be called one by one to the palace to see the emperor. They were picked based on their ages as vassal states, which represented the strength of their loyalty to Konkoku.

Meanwhile, the delegations from allied lands would be arriving. They stayed at minor castles positioned on the outskirts of Annei. As guests of Konkoku, their housing was provided by the empire.

While the ceremonial procession of envoys from vassals, allies, and those seeking ties with Konkoku met with the emperor, various events were held, such as hunts sponsored by the emperor and feasts conducted by court officials. At the end of Qi, when the month comes to a close, the emperor would hold a grand banquet at the imperial palace to celebrate a successful Qi.

The enormous banquet would have every delegation from Konkoku’s vassals and allies and every official in the imperial palace in attendance. It was held in

the great garden that spread out behind the Hall of New Harmony where no less than five hundred people would gather.

Rimi hadn't gotten to experience the feast the year before as she had been kept in the rear palace at the time. From what she'd heard, it had been glorious. There was fun, music, dancing, food, wine, and all manner of extravagance from across the world.

It was known as the Festival of Fulfillment, and when it ended, the gates of Konkoku would close once more.

"So if His Majesty's plan is to treat Saisakoku as courteously as possible, then even though we don't have any diplomatic ties with them, we need to treat them even better than our allies," Rimi muttered to herself.

Keiyu slid some papers to the center of the table.

"We within the Ministry of Rites thought the very same and came up with an idea. Housing them where we did last time: the Palace of Twin Dragons," he said.

"Housing a foreign delegation inside the imperial palace during Qi is beyond unheard of. You're going far past 'special treatment' here," Rihan groaned as he looked over the paper.

"Really?" Rimi interjected with a frown. "The same place as last time?"

"What's the problem with that?" Rihan asked.

"There's not a 'problem' exactly, but isn't it kind of boring?" Rimi said candidly. "It's the same as last time. This is Saisakoku's first delegation during Qi. Housing a delegation during Qi might be special treatment, but it won't feel like it to them. They'll think 'What? This is exactly the same as last time,' don't you think?"

As she finished speaking, she realized Rihan was glaring furiously at her. Her blood ran cold. Though he was a government official, he had an imposing look about him. When he was angry, he seemed more like a bandit leader than a bureaucrat.

"I-I-I'm sorry, Minister! I didn't— I mean, I wasn't— I just thought, that is, I

joke! I make joke!”

Rimi’s Konkokuan was usually flawless, but in her panic, it began to fall apart.

“Well then, where do you propose we put them?” Rihan asked, leaning over the table toward her.

She shrank down even smaller.

“I spoke out of turn. I’m sorry,” she said.

“I asked you a question! Where do we put them?!”

“Th-The Palace of the Water Spirit, maybe? I mean, I’ve heard Saisakoku is hot, and the breeze in the palace is so cool! It would be perfect! But it’s just an idea! I’m sorry!”

“Hmm,” Rihan grunted as he glared at Rimi, who was trying desperately to disappear into her seat. “I see.”

Keiyu suddenly burst into a fit of giggles and clapped the glowering Minister of Revenue on the shoulder.

“See? This is exactly why I borrowed her!” he exclaimed.

“Because she wasn’t born here, so she sees things differently. Is that what you’re saying?” Rihan asked.

Rimi, who was fearful and teary-eyed, was bewildered by Keiyu’s burst of laughter. She looked nervously between the two ministers. The laughing fit coming from the Minister of Rites wasn’t abating. Rihan glared at him out of the corner of his eye.

“Your plan’s...not bad,” Rihan said finally.

“I’m so-sorry?” Rimi said. She had prepared herself for rejection and had already started apologizing. His response drew a confused blink.

Did he say it wasn’t bad?

Keiyu, who had finally managed to stop laughing, slapped the slack-jawed Rimi on her back.

“He asked you for your opinion, and you gave him a good answer. That’s what passes for praise with him,” he explained.

He wanted my opinion?! He praised me?!

Just moments before, Rimi had felt as if she'd been sentenced to death. The strength ran out of her body.

"Tell me what your thoughts on these are, Setsu Rimi," Rihan said as he slipped some of the papers toward Rimi.

Keiyu grinned while Rihan wore an immovable scowl. As Rimi glanced back and forth between them, she began to calm down.

I'm actually being useful.

Happiness began to spread through Rimi's breast at the thought. She used it to spur herself on and took a quiet look over the papers. After a moment's thought, she looked up.

"Regarding the meals for the Saisakokuan delegation, may I offer an opinion?" she asked timidly.

Both ministers gave an encouraging nod.

Rimi didn't know much about governing, nor did she have the ability to maneuver within their world. But whether they wanted to or not, people like Shohi and Shusei had been born into the political world. It was a harsh fate, and she wanted to do anything she could to be of some help to those trapped within it.





The city of Annei suddenly blossomed with life as delegations from Wakoku and the other vassal states began to arrive. Overnight, it seemed to have turned into a port city.

During the hot summer months, men from foreign lands often wandered the dusty streets with wide, curious eyes. Stalls packed every inch of the roadside, their vendors eager to take advantage of the travelers' purses. However, the main thoroughfare had been cleared of stalls just hours before. All entry was forbidden.

Now, people crowded in the adjoining alleys, desperate to catch a glimpse of the Saisakokuan delegation that would soon be passing through.

Meanwhile, in a watchtower that stretched high above the main palace gate, Shu Kojin, To Rihan, and Jin Keiyu waited and watched. When the delegation from Saisakoku arrived, the trio was to greet them with a silent bow from the tower and welcome the envoys inside the palace, where they would meet the emperor.

Shu Kojin, Chancellor of Konkoku, silently braced himself as he watched the street below.

When the delegation arrives, Qi will truly begin. We can only hope that the Ho House doesn't do anything rash.

If the emperor could establish diplomatic relations with Saisakoku, it would improve his standing in the eyes of the court officials. The Ho House wouldn't like that, but Kojin still couldn't imagine them doing something to interfere with the negotiations. Ties with Saisakoku would be one of the most reliable sources of income for the empire. So if a Ho were to ascend to the throne, it would benefit them as well. A short-term loss would still bring a long-term gain.

Shusei, who sat at the center of the Ho House, would certainly be able to see that much.

Shusei, the wretched boy. I thought he was virtuous and upright like Seishu, but I was wrong. He only played at being virtuous.

Kojin had thought he knew everything about his adopted son. He had thought

that he had complete control over him. Now, the young scholar seemed more like an unknown monster. He had escaped from Kojin's clutches and become something completely different from what the chancellor had planned. Though he looked like Seishu, he acted nothing like the man. It was infuriating.

Seishu was nothing like that.

Shusei was like some hideous creature that had emerged wearing Seishu's skin. It filled Kojin with hatred and loathing. How cathartic it would be to grind him into the dirt, to make him crawl and wail and beg for mercy.

I will destroy him.

The thought brought a faint smile to the chancellor's face. He had hoped to use Rimi to achieve that goal, but Shusei's response ended up being disappointing. Perhaps now that he ruled the Ho House, he'd found more interesting diversions than chasing after consorts. Whatever the case, it simply meant that Kojin would have to find a new angle of attack.

Has Setsu Rimi lost all value as a pawn, then?

"Keiyu, you called on Setsu Rimi to assist with entertaining the Saisakokuans. Was she of any use?" Kojin asked casually.

"She was. It was her idea to house the delegation in the Palace of the Water Spirit. She also helped with other particulars, like the meal arrangements and selection of attendants. She's not the 'big picture' sort, but she's well-suited for practical matters. She's every bit the consort," Keiyu answered.

Since it had been decided that the Saisakokuan delegation would stay at the Palace of the Water Spirit, Rimi, who had originally been staying there, took it as an opportunity to move into one of the empty houses in the rear palace. The four consorts had apparently been delighted to have her living close by again.

A consort with no mind for the greater picture, whose only interest is the emperor's well-being. With no powerful backers and her ties with Shusei severed, she'd be easy to manage as empress. If any problems arise, she can be replaced.

Shohi had been adamant that the Nocturnal Liturgy go forward, and even Kojin wasn't opposed to the idea. If there ended up being any issues, Setsu Rimi

could always “disappear.”

“They’re here,” Keiyu said, drawing Kojin back to the present.

A pair of carriages, adorned in gold and escorted by soldiers and cavalry, was making its way up the main thoroughfare from the southern gate. It was the height of summer, so the walls had been removed from the carriages. With four posts supporting a roof and surrounded by sheer drapes, they looked more like palanquins. However, the drapes had been pulled aside to let the wind blow through the carriages, making it easy to see within.

Within the lead carriage, cotton pillows with delicate gold and silver embroidery could be seen, and on top of them sat the Saisakokuan ambassador, Gulzari Shar.

Rihan furrowed his brow.

“That’s Gulzari Shar, so why is there another carriage? Did they bring two envoys?”

Kojin squinted, trying to make out who rode in the second carriage as it approached.

“Ah!” Keiyu, who had exceptional eyesight, suddenly exclaimed. “It’s a woman!”

Kojin’s eyes widened. He was right. A young woman was riding in the second carriage.

News of Saisakoku’s court was not entirely secret. Through their dealings with the Southern Trinity, the news made its way to Konkoku as well. Kojin, who had been tasked with gathering information about the desert empire in preparation for their arrival, knew there was only one girl in Saisakoku who would warrant the same treatment as Gulzari Shar. Rihan and Keiyu would know that as well. Both of the ministers looked shocked beyond belief.

“They didn’t...” Rihan mumbled.

The words awakened Kojin from his momentary shock, and his mind immediately set about coming up with the best possible plan.

“Keiyu! Hurry to His Majesty and inform him that the Saisakokuan delegation

will be arriving to meet him, but tell him you have a request. Ask that he mentions nothing about the empress's enthronement ceremony," Kojin ordered sharply.

Keiyu acknowledged the command and left while Kojin and Rihan turned their attention back toward the approaching carriages.

"Chancellor, you don't think Saisakoku is actually..." Rihan said, trailing off.

Kojin, with a mixture of elation and nerves, nodded.

"I do. This is...superb."



The Hall of New Harmony had a high ceiling, reaching more than three body lengths into the air. The lofty ceiling was supported by magnificent pillars, each painted in vibrant colors atop a lavender background. A smooth, glassy stone spread out in front of the throne.

Court officials waited alongside the pillars. Among them were the six ministers, and representing a royal house, the master of the Ho House, Ho Shusei.

Before long, the hall would be filled with dozens of people representing Saisakoku.

Kojin, Rihan, and Keiyu had waited in the watchtower to greet the delegation as they arrived. The delegation was then led to the Hall of New Harmony while Shohi was summoned from his chambers to await their arrival.

When the Saisakokuans finally arrived at the gates, Keiyu had rushed off to inform the emperor.

"The delegation from Saisakoku has arrived, Your Majesty. Please, come to the Hall of New Harmony to greet them. But whatever you do, you must not mention the enthronement ceremony," he announced breathlessly.

Rimi, who was there at the time, seemed confused by the request. Shohi felt the same. He asked for an explanation, but Keiyu simply said he would explain later. The emperor relented and left for the Hall of New Harmony with Rimi and Jotetsu following behind him. As they walked, Shohi could hear the pair

whispering, low enough to keep Keiyu from hearing.

“Why would they want him to not mention the enthronement ceremony?” Jotetsu asked.

“Your guess is as good as mine,” Rimi responded in her usual carefree manner.

“Why would it even come up in diplomatic negotiations? There’s got to be some reason he’d specifically warn against it,” Jotetsu said before he simply shrugged it off. “Well, we’ll find out soon enough.”

The bodyguard’s message seemed to be *“Nothing to get worked up over yet.”*

What Shohi needed to focus on now was meeting the Saisakokuan delegation with the dignity and composure of an emperor.

Calm down.

While it was true that his duty here affected a wish that his land had held for more than a century, Shohi was dealing with Gulzari Shar. There was no point in getting worked up over meeting with a man he already knew well.

As they arrived at the Hall of New Harmony, it seemed the Saisakokuans were already there waiting.

They entered through the rear of the Hall of New Harmony. Shohi went on ahead while Jotetsu and Rimi waited behind. Though she was deeply involved with the preparations for entertaining the delegation, she was still considered to be a distant cousin of the Shu House with no rank. She had no place in official ceremonies.

Shohi stepped through the curtains and out into the main hall as Rimi and Jotetsu stood behind to watch. He fixed his gaze forward and made for the throne, mustering all the imperial grandeur he could. When he arrived at the throne, he finally turned his gaze on the dozens of Saisakokuan faces waiting for him.

He spied a familiar face at the head of the party: Gulzari Shar. But alongside him stood a young woman.

A woman?! Why is a woman here?!

Shohi’s eyes went wide.

Chapter 2: The Jewel of Saisha

I

“Hey, Rimi. Take a look. There’s a woman with the delegation.”

Jotetsu, never one for manners, had been peeking through a gap in the curtains before he suddenly and impatiently beckoned Rimi.

When Saisakoku had last come to Konkoku, they hadn’t had a single woman in their company. That was why Prince Shar had been delighted to come across Rimi in the imperial palace. Although it was now far better traveling weather than it had been in winter, the journey was still a long one. Rimi thought that men and women had different levels of fortitude, so they didn’t travel well together. She was curious to get a look at a woman who had made such a long journey, so she peeked out through the curtain alongside Jotetsu.

Sure enough, there was a girl of thirteen or fourteen years. She looked about the same age as Pure Consort Yo, if perhaps a bit younger. She was also allowed to stand alongside Shar, the Saisakokuan ambassador, which meant she held equal status to him. In other words, she was royalty.

“Rise, Prince Shar. Konkoku greets Saisakoku as a friend. There is no need for an ambassador to kneel,” Shohi said.

The delegation rose at Shohi’s command.

Shar’s silvery hair and purple eyes suited his tanned skin beautifully. He wore a long jacket with fine embroidery and an exquisite soft cloth around his waist. His expression was just as kind and gentle as Rimi remembered.

And yet, it was the girl to his side that drew attention.

“She’s gorgeous,” Rimi whispered.

Rimi’s sister had a cool, composed beauty. The four consorts each had a beauty of their own, elegant or charming. But this girl was something else entirely. Rimi had never seen beauty like hers, either in Wakoku or Konkoku. It

was beyond comparison, even to a flower or sunlight shining upon the sea.

She was draped in a magnificent wrap that was dyed in a delicate floral style with even more intricate gold and silver embroidery. It was skillfully tied around her shoulder and across her chest, fastened in place high on her waist with a sash. Another sheer piece of fabric was draped over her head. Her fine, silky hair, veiled by the cloth, seemed neither gold nor silver. It was like the color of faint sunlight. Her brow, neck, and hands were adorned with jewelry so delicate that they looked as if the slightest tug might break them.

The girl's skin was white as porcelain, save for the faintly rosy shade in her cheeks, and her eyes were the same shade of blue as Tama's. She certainly didn't look Wakokuan or Konkokuan, but she also did not look Saisakokuan. Those from the lands far to the north-west had white skin, angular faces, and stood quite tall. This girl's skin resembled theirs, though her features were different and she lacked their height.

"It pleases me deeply to see you once again, Your Majesty," Shar said with a smile. His Konkokuan was flawless.

"And I'm pleased to have you with us, Prince Shar. We have specially prepared my summer residence for you and your delegation to stay in. Our gates are open for the length of Qi, and I hope your time here is relaxing," Shohi said.

"You are too kind. And where are my manners? Allow me to introduce my companion. This is Aisha, the only daughter of our emperor. She is the finest dancer in Saisakoku, and His Imperial Majesty of Saisakoku ordered that she accompany me, in hopes of bringing some extra spark to the Festival of Fulfillment," Shar said.

The court officials who had been standing by began to clamor. Shusei, who stood apart from the other officials, had a more clouded expression.

"It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Your Majesty," Aisha said as she looked up fearlessly at Shohi with her beautiful blue eyes. Her command of Konkokuan was impeccable.

Though she stood straight and tall, her manner was delicate. Even her smallest motions were captivating. At Shar's insistence, Princess Aisha kneeled

before the emperor.

“I am Aisha, imperial princess of Saisakoku.”

Once she finished her introduction, Aisha rose to her feet again and turned her face away in a huff.

“Please, enjoy your time in Konkoku, Princess Aisha. I look forward to seeing you dance at the festival,” Shohi said.

“You’ll be disappointed, then,” she said.

Aisha’s response to Shohi’s polite and conventional greeting was completely unexpected. Shohi blinked repeatedly, seemingly unable to believe his ears.

“Aisha!” Shar hissed quietly with a pained expression.

But Aisha refused to be silenced.

“I am sorry, but I must correct my uncle. I will not be dancing at the Festival of Fulfillment,” Aisha insisted. “My father may have ordered it, but I dance only when I choose to. That is how I have always acted. I told my father that, and he said, ‘Go anyway.’ So I am here. This is my first time in a foreign land, so I will enjoy the sights of Konkoku, but that is all.”

The girl stood before the ruler of a foreign land and said such things so cheerfully without any fear or hostility. It was like she was just saying what she wanted to say.



Rimi was utterly shocked. Jotetsu's mouth hung agape as well.

"What did you just say?" Shohi said. Surely she spoke without thinking.

"I said I won't be dancing. I'm sorry, should I speak up?" Aisha said with a smile, cocking her head.

"Forgive her, Your Majesty! Aisha is still new to the world, and clearly hasn't learned her manners," Shar interjected.

Aisha looked annoyed and was about to say something, but Shohi took Shar's cue and spoke first.

"Of course, Prince Shar. Your delegation are honored guests in our land. We can hardly worry about such small details. More importantly, I'd like to know if there's anything you need or anything we can do for you?" Shohi asked.

Aisha's outlandish comment had put Gulzari Shar in an extremely bad position. Shohi had recognized that and continued the conversation as though she'd said nothing. Shar's gratitude was clear from his relieved smile.

"I do have one request. Aisha had an attendant with her, but I'm afraid the journey has left the woman exhausted and unable to fulfill her duties. I was wondering if I might borrow an attendant in her place? I'm already acquainted with one of the rear palace consorts, Setsu Rimi," Shar said.

Rimi was surprised to hear her name spoken. For a moment, she was excited by the idea of attending to such a beautiful girl. But she quickly realized that it would be a problem for someone in her position to serve as a lady-in-waiting to a foreign diplomat.

"What? Setsu Rimi?" Shohi said, naturally surprised as well. "No, that's—"

"Of course," Kojin said, cutting off the emperor's refusal.

Shohi looked at the chancellor in confusion, and Shusei fixed him with a sharp glare as well. Kojin pretended not to notice and gave a deep bow.

"No need to worry, Prince Gulzari Shar. I will prepare Setsu Rimi to attend to Princess Aisha," Kojin continued. "Your delegation will also be served by our ministers of Rites and Revenue in the name of His Majesty."

“You’re too generous, Chancellor,” Shar said brightly.

With the ambassador looking so pleased, Shohi wasn’t able to interrupt, though he clearly wanted to. He glared at Kojin and seemed on the verge of demanding an explanation.

“I appreciate Your Majesty’s thoughtfulness,” Shar said.

“Of course,” Shohi responded, nodding bitterly.

“I think it would be fun to attend to Princess Aisha, but should I really be doing that in my position?” Rimi asked, looking up at Jotetsu who was peeking through the curtain beside her.

“No. It’s bad for both His Majesty and you. I guess this is why they asked him not to mention your enthronement,” Jotetsu said with a grim look. “He’s always doing this sort of thing...”

“What do you mean it’s bad for us?” Rimi asked.

“Why do you think Saisakoku sent their princess on a diplomatic mission?” Jotetsu asked after a long period of silence.

“Prince Shar said it was to liven up the Festival of Fulfillment?”

“That’s what they say. But if that’s what they really wanted, the moment she said she wouldn’t dance, it would’ve been the end of it. Having her show up and refuse to dance would be, well, you saw how it went,” Jotetsu explained. “They sent her anyway because they’re serious about establishing diplomatic ties. And once Saisakoku has a diplomatic relationship, they’re going to send the princess to Konkoku as a bride. They are laying the groundwork for that. They want to introduce Aisha to His Majesty.”

“If that means they’re serious about building a diplomatic relationship, then that’s great for His Majesty!” Rimi said excitedly. If Shohi could achieve Konkoku’s long-held desire, it would definitely improve his image in the eyes of the court.

“And what about you?” Jotetsu asked.

“Huh?” Rimi said, tilting her head.

“A princess from the richest land on the continent? If she joined the rear

palace, Konkoku would have to offer her the highest position they could.”

A position above even the four consorts. In other words, empress. The position that Rimi tentatively occupied.

“That’s why Chancellor Shu asked His Majesty not to mention your enthronement. The moment he saw the princess arrive, he got to work removing the one obstacle to her becoming empress: you.”

“So why did the chancellor let them use me as Princess Aisha’s attendant?”

“Your enthronement’s still up in the air. He’s trying to make it seem like it never happened. If you’re too busy entertaining, you won’t have time for the Nocturnal Liturgy. It’s going to be called off again,” Jotetsu explained.

It wasn’t as if Rimi wanted to be empress. She just wanted to be by Shohi’s side to support him. She had been offered the position and took it. That was all. She had no attachment to the idea, and if her presence was going to get in the way of diplomatic relations with Saisakoku, she was happy to step aside. If it could improve Shohi’s position even a little, she couldn’t ask for anything more.

But I cut ties with Wakoku. I’m not Lady of Precious Bevy Setsu anymore. The Umashi-no-Miya Ayako is no longer a part of the rear palace.

Rimi’s official existence had been altered. She was now a distant cousin of the Shu House. How would she be treated if she was no longer the empress-to-be? If she were to re-enter the rear palace, her existence as a former candidate for empress might upset the new empress. Kojin wouldn’t allow that.

So who would Rimi become? Where would she go? She had cut ties with Wakoku. She had no home to return to.

Shohi wouldn’t be cruel, of course. Perhaps he’d give her somewhere to live outside of the palace. But she would have no hope of being close enough to support him.

I might lose my place in the world all over again...

Unease began to swell within her.

“Hey, are you all right?” Jotetsu asked, concerned as he watched Rimi go pale.

“Setsu Rimi,” someone called from behind them.

Rimi and Jotetsu turned around to see Keiyu pacing toward them. They both offered hasty bows.

“The delegation is leaving for the Palace of the Water Spirit. Did you hear what they spoke about? You are to serve Princess Aisha as a lady-in-waiting,” Keiyu said.

“Oh, right. I heard,” Rimi said.

“Then we can skip the explanations. Gather your things from the rear palace and return to the Palace of the Water Spirit. A carriage has been prepared for you at the Ministry of Rites.”

“I understand,” Rimi said with a bow.

“Don’t let me down,” Keiyu said before hurrying out the door.

“What are you going to do?” Jotetsu said, turning his attention to Rimi once the minister had left.

“Well, first I’m going to gather my things,” she said.

“After that, I mean. Are you okay with this?”

Rimi thought for a moment then gave a wide smile.

“Well, there’s no point in trying to figure that out right now. I’ll have plenty of time to think while I’m serving Princess Aisha.”

Rimi parted with Jotetsu and made for the rear palace as Keiyu had ordered. Right now, she had an important duty to fulfill. The rest was in fate’s hands. She was frightened by the idea of her situation changing, but none of it seemed quite real yet.

It had only been a few days since she’d moved to the rear palace, and now she was forced to move once again. It was a chaotic experience, but it had to be done.

Tama, who was happily curled up on a rafter, watched Rimi as she rushed to collect her things.

Don’t strain yourself, the dragon’s eyes seemed to say.

Rimi carefully wrapped her kaorizuke pot in a cloth and stowed it inside a

walnut wardrobe. She then proceeded to stuff her clothes in the wardrobe in whatever way would fit.

“Why do we have to rush?” griped her old handmaid as she raced from place to place alongside Rimi.

Suddenly, the four consorts rushed in, panting for breath. From their fearful expressions, they’d surely heard that Rimi would be returning to the Palace of the Water Spirit to serve as the princess of Saisakoku’s attendant.

“What’s wrong?” Rimi asked, bowing as they entered. Her hair was a mess from sticking her head in and out of the wardrobe.

“Lady of Precious Bevy Setsu, what is the meaning of this?!” Consort So demanded, rushing over to Rimi and seizing her by the shoulder. Yo, Ho, and On were close behind her, boxing Rimi in as if preparing to interrogate her. The handmaid was so frightened that she backed into a corner and cowered.

“I’m not sure what you want me to say. I’m going back to the Palace of the Water Spirit to serve the princess from Saisakoku as a handmaid,” Rimi said.

“But my dearest, the Nocturnal Liturgy is this month! What’s going to happen to that?! What does His Majesty think of this?!” Yo cried.

“Oh, I haven’t talked to him about it. The Minister of Rites ordered me to return to the Palace of the Water Spirit before His Majesty was finished speaking to the delegation,” Rimi said.

“So he’s going to postpone it again? What is that man thinking?” Ho grumbled.

“You’re going to be empress. You’ve already gone through your Executive Audience. Why would they make you serve as some handmaid? I can’t accept it,” So said indignantly. “How could His Majesty do something like this?”

“It was a request from the Saisakokuan ambassador, Prince Gulzari Shar. Chancellor Shu approved his request right on the spot too,” Rimi responded.

“Chancellor Shu! So he’s the one who decided this?” Ho said, her expression growing even sterner.

The consorts all exchanged looks. From their expressions, it seemed they’d

realized that Rimi's position as future empress was in peril.

"I'm just going to go along with things. Princess Aisha seems really interesting. I think it'll be fun!" Rimi said, trying to assuage their worries with a smile and a casual wave.

On clutched Rimi's hand.

"We're on your side, Lady Setsu. Please, don't forget that," she said. Her expression was gentle but tinged with sadness. The other consorts all gave a fierce nod in agreement.

"Thank you, everyone," Rimi said. She was happy they cared about her.



The four consorts saw Rimi to the inner gate of the rear palace as she left. She smiled brightly and waved goodbye as she crossed through the gate before moving out of sight. When she had disappeared, So breathed a sigh.

"I'm not sure Lady Setsu really understands her position. To think they would make her serve as a handmaid to a Saisakokuan princess. Chancellor Shu is clearly trying to snatch her position from her. I just hope His Majesty doesn't share that sentiment," So said.

"My dearest always has her head in the clouds. I'm not sure it's quite clicked for her," Yo said in annoyance.

"I will say, it's not an easy problem to solve," Ho said with a frown.

They'd all held their tongues because they knew they were servants of the emperor. If circumstances were different, they could just appeal to him on behalf of their friend. But as Shohi's retainers, they had to think of how important a diplomatic relationship would be for the emperor.

On shook her head.

"This is a problem between Lady Setsu and His Majesty. All we can do is respect their decision," she said.

"But you know how my dearest is! She might not even realize!" Yo insisted.

"No, she's realized. When I held her hand, she wasn't herself at all. She seemed so worried," On said.

The consorts stayed there for some time after, looking at the closed gate from beneath silk umbrellas while cicadas wailed from the trees.



A slight distance from the inner gate where the consorts stood and watched Rimi leave was the hall where the eunuchs carried out their duties. Near the main gate, on a walkway leading from the hall, was Director Sai Hakurei. The pale man with his golden eyes and enchanting smile stood with his hand on the walkway's railing, observing as Rimi's carriage departed through the main gate.

The month of Qi, when the city filled with visitors from foreign lands, had little to do with the rear palace. Even so, news had a way of traveling, and Hakurei had heard about the arrival of the Jewel of Saisha. From the moment news of her visit had reached him, the eunuch knew what Saisakoku intended.

Oh, Rimi. Despite how much it hurt, you buried your love to become His Majesty's bride. But politics still found a way to pervert the fate you yourself chose.

His heart broke for her. And yet...

His Majesty has no choice. He must marry the princess.

The fate of a dear friend was nothing compared to a wish the empire had held for more than a century. Rimi's predicament saddened him, but the politics of the situation couldn't be denied.

Once, Hakurei had been of noble blood. He had been taught how important riches and glory were for a nation. When poverty consumed a realm, it turned into a land of beasts. History had shown how frightening such an outcome could be.

Even when his twisted feelings toward Shohi had become too much to bear, he had still struggled to do something that would spell the emperor's death and cast the empire into chaos and violence. That was why he couldn't bear to raise a hand against Shohi either.

Hakurei also knew very well that letting emotion drive politics could lead an empire to ruin.

But what would the consorts think if they learned of Hakurei's thoughts on

the matter? They'd undoubtedly be furious. Especially Consort Ho. She would despise the eunuch more intensely than she already did.

He looked out at the harsh summer light cascading off the eaves of the main gate.

The imperial court was a world of politics and cooperation. It didn't exist for the emperor alone. But the rear palace was the emperor's world. It existed only for Shohi. And as director of the rear palace, it was Hakurei's world to care for.

I'm sorry, Rimi. My duty is to make the rear palace a place of joy for His Majesty.

II

"How could she be so rude?! It's not like I ordered her to dance! Dance, don't dance, who cares?! Did you see how embarrassed Prince Shar was?!" Shohi roared as they returned to his chambers. "And what the hell were you thinking, Kojin?! How could you approve of Rimi serving as a handmaid to such a bizarre girl? And without discussing it with me?! How can we have the Nocturnal Liturgy now? Are we really going to make Rimi wait again?!"

Shohi kicked over the sofa in anger. It had been some time since he'd had such a tantrum. But Kojin didn't raise an eyebrow, even as the sofa thumped loudly against the floor.

"The ambassador holds the key to our empire's future. Would you have preferred that I denied his request outright?" Kojin asked calmly.

"I'm not saying you should have denied it. Why not explain the situation to him and see if he's fine with a different handmaid who is just as capable?"

"We could've done that. I just thought this was a convenient opportunity."

"Convenient how?"

"It's the perfect way to erase Setsu Rimi's indefinite status as future empress," Kojin explained.

"What exactly are you saying?" Shohi demanded, unable to make sense of

what he was hearing.

The emperor looked to Rihan and Keiyu, who stood behind Kojin. From their expressions, it seemed they understood the chancellor's intent completely. Shohi then looked to Jotetsu, who was standing near the window. Though he wore an uncomfortable frown, even he seemed to understand what Kojin was saying.

"Where is this coming from? Why would you want to erase Rimi's status?" Shohi asked.

"Saisakoku sent the princess as a way of expressing that they're prepared to establish a relationship between our lands," Kojin explained.

Shohi's eyes went wide as the chancellor spoke.

"What did you say?" he asked.

"There can be no doubt. When countries of similar power establish diplomatic ties, it's customary to seal the arrangement with a marriage. And as a display of that intent, a country will send the future bride."

Understanding began to dawn on Shohi as Kojin explained the situation. Slowly, joy began to sprout inside of the emperor. He almost wanted to get up and dance.

"Diplomatic ties... You're saying we're going to actually do it?!" he said, elated.

Shohi's position as emperor had been upended by the Ho House. If he could establish a diplomatic relationship with Saisakoku, it would be an enormous gain.

"Finally! We're going to do it!" the emperor cried, unable to hide his excitement. "But what does that have to do with Rimi?"

"If the imperial princess of Saisakoku enters the rear palace, we cannot expect her to be a mere consort. A condition of the arrangement would be granting her the highest status possible. In other words, it would be unthinkable to make her anything but empress. Setsu Rimi's current status is inconvenient," Kojin explained icily.

Shohi stood in a daze. He felt as if he'd been hit over the head.

Inconvenient? Inconvenient?!

The joy that the emperor had felt only moments before turned to ice within him. The news suddenly seemed disastrous.

"I don't want her!" Shohi spat. He didn't even think as he spoke. "The only one I want by my side is Rimi! I don't need anyone else!"

Yet even as his fists shook in anger, the cool voice of reason whispered inside him, asking if that was really the right decision.

You can't just say you don't want her.

Yet his heart wouldn't relent. It burned for sweet, gentle Rimi. He finally had her, even if it had cost him Shusei in the process. There was no way he could let her go now.

"But Your Majesty—"

"I said I don't want her!" Shohi roared again. He then turned his back on the others and marched into his bedroom. He slammed the door behind him and threw himself onto the bed, burying his face in the covers. Why couldn't he just follow his heart? It would be so much less painful. He wanted to ignore Kojin's words and make Rimi his empress.

But Shohi was the emperor, and unpleasant as it was, his sense of duty had been growing. And protecting his own position meant protecting the consorts and everyone else who supported him. He wanted to establish solid ties with Saisakoku to secure his place as emperor.

Am I really going to postpone the Nocturnal Liturgy again? Am I supposed to act as if I don't want Rimi to be my bride? I can't say that. I don't want to say it. I want her to be by my side forever.

Shohi was in agony as he tried to decide what to do.



Rihan and Keiyu followed Kojin out of the emperor's chambers. The sun was blistering and even the surrounding cloister was choked with heat.

"Keiyu. Rihan. I'm sure I don't need to remind you, but you must see to every

one of the Saisakokuan delegation's needs," Kojin ordered.

"But of course. We're going to be escorting the delegation to the Palace of the Water Spirit right after this," Keiyu said with a grin.

"There is no room for failure here," the chancellor said. He then stopped walking and turned around. "One more thing. Make sure His Majesty and Princess Aisha spend time together. Make sure they develop feelings for each other. We need her to be his empress."

"With all due respect, it's clear from that display just now that His Majesty wants Setsu Rimi. Can't we find a different position for Princess Aisha when she joins the rear palace?" Rihan said with a frown.

"You would place a princess from the richest country in the world beneath a girl from a minor vassal? And you think Saisakoku would approve of that?"

Rihan had no response to Kojin's retort.

"But people's hearts aren't that easy to change," Keiyu suddenly interjected, lacking his usual flippant expression.

"Do it anyway. There are plenty of methods of doing so," Kojin said. He then turned away and left.

Both ministers, left standing in the middle of the sweltering cloister, sighed before heading for the carriage bound for the Palace of the Water Spirit. They would normally have taken separate carriages, but since they had to work together, they shared a carriage provided by the Ministry of Rites as they guided the foreign delegation with a cavalry escort.

"I don't like this. Why do we have to be the ones playing matchmaker? I'm no brothel madam. Not to mention how unruly the girl is. She ignores her emperor-father's orders, but we're supposed to control her? And what's more...I don't like the idea of playing with people's hearts," Rihan grumbled with crossed arms as they rode.

Keiyu, seemingly fed up with the heat, uncinched his shenyi and leaned his elbow lazily on the carriage's window frame.

"Manipulating people's hearts is all a part of politics. Don't be so uptight,

Rihan,” he said.

“Maybe if this were a matter of ideology, I wouldn’t mind it so much. But we’re talking about people’s emotions. Manipulating someone’s feelings seems like conspiring against them. And what happens if they find out? They won’t even be able to trust their own feelings. It would destroy them.”

“Yes, if someone found out that even their romantic feelings had been manipulated, they’d probably despise themselves,” Keiyu said with a faint smile.

Rihan scowled.

“Is there anything that doesn’t amuse you? That’s one thing I’ve always hated about you. It was the same with Sohei,” he said.

“Sohei? We’re dredging up ancient history now?” Keiyu said.

Keiyu and Rihan had taken their appointment exams and become bureaucrats at the same time, but they’d known each other even before pursuing the path of government. It was common for several students to take up residence at the homes of famous scholars to study and prepare for their exams. The students were generally the children of the elite, but sometimes an outstanding commoner would be sponsored by a local bureaucrat.

Rihan’s family, the To House, had served as central government officials for generations. Keiyu came from a great house that had earned huge swaths of land during the founding of Konkoku, though they were not quite as powerful as the Five Houses.

Both had become students of Master Yo, a scholar famous throughout Annei, but there was another student there at the time by the name of Sohei. One of the sons from a branch family of the Five Houses, he was a proud man, but not a particularly quick-witted one.

Once, the students had all been participating in a debate. Sohei was humiliated when a pet theory of his was demolished. In his humiliation, he tried to die by throwing himself down the well in the garden. The other students were in a panic trying to restrain him. Keiyu, who had been standing off to the side, began to laugh uproariously, as if unable to contain himself. Everyone,

Sohei included, was so shocked that they froze in place.

“Why are you laughing?!” one of the students had demanded.

“What do you mean, why? Watching you guys all shouting and grabbing each other is funny!” Keiyu had said between laughs.

The shock of the situation had calmed Sohei down, but he ended up leaving Master Yo’s tutelage in despair the following day.

“You didn’t care about Sohei’s despair or the feelings of the people desperately trying to stop him from killing himself. You just thought the scuffle was funny,” Rihan said.

“Master Yo might have been fond of saying ‘always keep others’ hearts close to your own,’ but you’ll just make yourself sick doing that. It’s a sure path to misery,” Keiyu said.

“You’ve been saying that for years now while all I’ve thought is ‘I want to get as far away from a person like that as I can.’ Yet somehow, I’m still stuck looking at that stupid grin.”

“Sometimes, you just have to accept your fate. Besides, the chancellor ordered it, right?”

Rihan was silent for a time, then he sourly nodded.

“If I have no choice, then so be it. I do feel bad for His Majesty and Rimi, though,” he said.

Rihan and Keiyu both looked out the window to watch the extravagant Saisakokuan carriages following behind them. Clouds of dust filled the air, filtering out the fierce summer sun.

“I’ll write a message to His Majesty and send it back to the palace with one of the escorts advising him to give a personal greeting to Prince Shar and Princess Aisha before the day is through. That way, the emperor should arrive and see the princess shortly after we do. She’ll believe he favors her, and he’ll have an opportunity to see her beauty up close,” Keiyu said.

The minister’s quick plan drew a sour look from Rihan.

“You really think His Majesty will come? After what happened before?” he

said.

“He will. I’ll say Rimi seems to be having a hard time and he’ll come running.”

“You say you don’t keep others’ hearts close, but you seem awfully good at manipulating them. I can’t stand that about you.”

“Oh? You keep others’ hearts close and hate manipulating them. I love that about you.”

“You’re shameless,” Rihan grumbled.

Keiyu simply smiled.



Rimi had arrived at the Palace of the Water Spirit a little before the ministers and Saisakokuan delegation. Unable to settle her nerves, she paced back and forth in her room.

She was delighted by the opportunity to see Prince Shar again. He would surely be traveling with Shuri as well, and Rimi was excited by the idea of learning more about Saisakokuan cuisine.

But Aisha loomed large in Rimi’s mind. Even from a distance, the girl was overwhelmingly beautiful. The duty of attending to someone like that was more imposing than she’d realized. The very idea of appearing in front of Aisha made Rimi feel awkward. Furthermore, she felt anxious about the idea of losing her position, and Aisha was the reason for that. It was a complicated situation.

I’ll just have to deal with things as they come up.

Rimi remembered when her life as an Umashi-no-Miya had suddenly ended when she had been sent to Konkoku. She had been anxious then too. She’d felt sad and powerless. But she’d decided it was all out of her hands and had crossed the sea.

But look how many wonderful people I have around me now. No matter what happens, it’ll be okay. I’m sure of it. It’ll be okay.

Aren’t you going to have to start all over? a timid, negative voice said in her mind.

“It’ll be okay,” Rimi whispered to herself.

You don't have any guarantee things will turn out all right.

"It'll be okay," she whispered again, shaking the thought away.

The breeze that ran through the Palace of the Water Spirit was chilly, but Rimi had still managed to work up a sweat from her pacing. Even so, her palms were cold and clammy.

Petting Tama as she walked did little to help, either, and the Quinary Dragon looked up at Rimi. Her big, round eyes shone with concern.

Before long, a messenger approached and announced the arrival of the ministers and the Saisakokuan delegation.

No daydreaming now, Rimi.

She took a deep breath, bid farewell to Tama, and made her way stiffly into another room with a balcony overlooking the Jade Spring. As she neared her destination, she came across an old familiar face.

Tan skin, silver hair, purple eyes, and a somewhat sensual mole beneath his eye. The moment she saw him, all of Rimi's anxiety evaporated.

"Shuri!" Rimi cried as she rushed over to him.

The moment Shuri laid eyes on Rimi, he smiled wide.

"Rimi! It is good to see you!" he said, taking hold of Rimi and squeezing her tight.

It was an innocent embrace, the way one might hug a pet. Though Rimi cried out in surprise, she wasn't upset. His embrace managed to instantly relax both her body and mind.

III

"Have you been well?" Rimi asked.

Shuri nodded and quickly released her.

"I have spent so much time wanting to thank you for before," he said.

“For before? You mean last time you came? What did I do?” she asked.

“Thanks to you, I love snow now!” Shuri exclaimed.

“Oh! I don’t really get what you mean, but I’m glad?” she said, happy that he was happy.

Shuri gave an awkward smile then put his hand on Rimi’s back, ushering her toward the door.

“There are so many things I would like to talk about, but please, come in first. Prince Shar and Princess Aisha are waiting!” Shuri urged. “I told Princess Aisha about you. I told her you are a princess from Wakoku and you make delicious food!”

I make delicious food.

The idea of someone saying that about her was a bit embarrassing, but it also made her swell with pride.

Rimi stepped into the room with a mixture of happiness and apprehension.

“I am Setsu Rimi. I believe you called for me?” she said with a reverent bow.

“Come, stand. Let’s do this like last time. No need to be so formal!” Shar said.

At his insistence, Rimi rose to her feet.

Rihan and Keiyu were in the room, standing by the wall. Farther back, Shar sat on a sofa, and Aisha sat delicately beside him. At the Hall of New Harmony, she had seemed so grand and mature as she kneeled. But now, she looked so small and seemed very much like a child. Even so, she remained miraculously beautiful.

“Come here, Rimi. Have you been well?” Shar said with his characteristically kind and inviting smile. His smile put her at ease.

As Rimi approached, Aisha looked up at her with curious, blue eyes.

Wow, she looks even prettier up close. Her eyes are like Tama’s.

Even Rimi felt her heart flutter when the girl looked at her like that.

“Aisha, this is the girl Shuri and I told you about. Meet Setsu Rimi. She’ll be staying with you while you spend time here,” Shar said.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Princess Aisha,” Rimi added, kneeling.

Suddenly, Aisha jumped to her feet and approached the consort. She came so close that her nose was nearly poking Rimi. The princess then stared intently at her.

Though Rimi was frozen in place, her mind spun into a panic.

Wh-What’s going on?! Is she trying to intimidate me?! Does she dislike me?! Or am I really that funny looking?! She’s so pretty! This is so embarrassing!

Suddenly, Aisha burst into laughter.

“She’s adorable!” the princess said, turning back to her uncle. “Look at her big round eyes! She’s like a little creature! I think I like her, Uncle. May we go have fun? It’s too formal here. I hate it.”

“Yes, go have fun,” Shar responded with a smile.

No sooner had the words left his mouth than Aisha grabbed Rimi’s hand and grinned mischievously. She then ran from the room, tugging Rimi along behind her.

Wh-Wh-Wh-What?!

Rimi was bewildered by the sudden turn of events, but she had no way of denying the princess. Rihan and Keiyu both gave shocked glances as Rimi was dragged out of the room.

Aisha’s tiara, earrings, and necklace all jangled as she ran. Her garments fluttered in the breeze, exuding the sweet scent of exotic perfumes.

“Let’s go to the spring!” Aisha said, smiling back at Rimi. She didn’t even wait for the consort’s answer before pulling her out from the cloister and down to the gardens alongside the Jade Spring.

“Ahh, the breeze feels wonderful!” the princess said, finally releasing Rimi’s hand and prancing toward the water.

The Jade Spring was bordered by a waist-high stone fence that separated it from the rest of the gardens. On the other side of the fence, lotuses bloomed at the shallow, swampy edge connected to the spring. Aisha ran for the fence and sprang over it.

“Princess Aisha?!” Rimi cried out in surprise.

Rimi was astonished by the princess’s grace and by the fact that she would go leaping fences. Before Rimi could stop her, Aisha was already over the fence and into the shallows.

“Eek! It’s so sticky! I love it!” Aisha laughed, stomping her feet up and down in the tacky mud. The waters leading from the Jade Spring were wonderfully cool.

Rimi, aware of the fact that the swamp could be unexpectedly deep further on, went deeply pale.

“Princess Aisha, please, just stay right there, okay?!” Rimi pleaded as she clambered over the fence, trying to chase after the princess.

“What the hell are you doing?!” someone barked from behind her.

Rimi, who was flustered and trying desperately to scale the fence, was so shocked by the voice that she ended up tumbling into the mud with a cry. It wasn’t a long way to fall, but as she crashed face-first into the lotus-strewn water, her breath caught painfully in her chest.

However, Aisha was immediately at Rimi’s side, pulling her up by the arm. Rimi climbed to her feet, dripping from head to toe with muddy water.

“Th-Thank you, Princess Aisha,” she said.

“Are you all right? I’m sorry, I may have lost myself in the moment. I’ve just never felt such a nice breeze before,” Aisha said, her brows knitting apologetically. She then turned to see who had startled Rimi. Rimi looked as well.

A man stood in the gardens beneath the shining summer sun, wearing a shenyi embroidered with silver dragons and dyed so dark a purple, it looked nearly black. It was the young, beautiful emperor, and he bore a shocked expression. Jotetsu was behind him, wide-eyed at the sight of two women of rank standing in a swamp and covered in mud.

“Your Majesty! What are you doing here?” Rimi asked, surprised by his sudden arrival.

“Keiyu advised me that Shar and Aisha would be arriving soon and I should

come to greet them. What are *you* doing?!” Shohi asked.

“Me?” Rimi said.

The response made the emperor look away in embarrassment.

“That aside, I came to offer my greetings to our guest,” Shohi said, turning his attention to the perplexed Aisha and offering a strained smile. “I wasn’t expecting to see you before I even arrived at your room. And certainly not ankle-deep in mud.”

Aisha, seemingly insulted by Shohi’s dismayed expression, turned up her nose at him.

“Oh, your greetings aren’t required. Please, just pretend I’m not here and go see Uncle. I’ll keep spending time with Rimi,” she responded.

“You don’t need to tell me what to do. I’ll just say this before I go, don’t be rough with her,” Shohi ordered.

“I’m not being rough with her,” Aisha said, her eyes widening in surprise.

“And the mud all over her?”

“That was because you surprised her. In other words, it’s *your* fault. Show a little remorse.”

“*Re-Remorse?*” Shohi repeated. Rather than anger, he seemed more bewildered by the word. This was beyond rude. It was a whole new level of insolence. Rimi, Shohi, and Jotetsu were struck dumb.

A girl with otherworldly beauty stood with her nose upturned in the middle of a swampy mire. Though her feet were buried in muck, her expression was defiant.

Yes, and? she seemed to say.

Rimi was utterly awestruck by her.

Wow... I don’t think I’ve ever met anyone so uninhibited since my sister.



Shohi met with Shar for a short but pleasant chat and then excused himself. Before returning to the palace, he decided to visit Rimi.

It seemed Aisha was weary from her journey and had gone to bed early. Rimi had bathed to remove the mud from her body and was now happily watching the Quinary Dragon sit on top of a table. The legendary beast was nibbling on a piece of kaorizuke

“Oh! I’m sorry, I don’t have much to serve you,” Rimi said, offering some kaorizuke and fragrant tea for the emperor when he appeared with Jotetsu.

Shohi sat down at the table and the Quinary Dragon jumped happily into his lap. Truthfully, he was quite happy that the divine dragon had finally taken to him. He stroked its velvety fur as he tried a piece of kaorizuke.

“How can the Saisakokuans let a shrew like that run around?” he grumbled, finally letting loose the annoyance he’d been holding back.

“When you say ‘shrew,’ who do you mean?” Rimi asked, tilting her head.

“He’s talking about the lovely little princess, who else?” Jotetsu said with a wry smile from the windowsill he was lazing on.

“Oh, Princess Aisha? She’s so...how do I put it...manly? No, that’s not right. Unique?” Rimi said, searching for a word that wouldn’t be rude.

“Arrogant and self-obsessed. That’s what she is.” Shohi was blunter about such matters.

“You’re right. She reminds me of you back when we first met,” Rimi said.

“I wasn’t nearly that self-obsessed.”

“Uh-uh, I’d say you were about the same. And you were cruel too!”

Hearing her say such awful things with a smile made Shohi’s shoulders slump.

Was I really that bad when we met? What a disgrace.

Clearly, the emperor of Saisakoku intended to use Aisha to secure ties to Konkoku. But after a display like that? The girl had refused to dance at the Festival of Fulfillment, even though it was apparently an order from the emperor. She had played in the mud like a child and clashed with Shohi. Even if the emperor of Saisakoku ordered her to wed Shohi, she would probably just say, “No, I don’t want to.” What a mess they would be in then.

Shohi knew that he needed to make Aisha empress if he wanted to strengthen Konkoku's relationship with Saisakoku. But his heart wasn't interested in rational decisions. It longed for Rimi. And Aisha clearly wasn't interested in marrying Shohi either. He had no idea how things would unfold.

From a practical perspective, however, holding the Nocturnal Liturgy had become impossible. He had to tell Rimi that and apologize. Shohi held the Quinary Dragon to his chest, straightened his back, and looked at Rimi.

"Rimi. I must apologize to you. The Nocturnal Liturgy needs to be postponed again. With you attending to Aisha, it will be impossible to hold it for the entirety of Qi."

He was sure she would be distraught, but to his surprise, she smiled.

"Oh?" she asked.

"Also, the emperor of Saisakoku sent Aisha here to...well, to seal the relationship between our lands. He..." Shohi said, trailing off. He didn't want to finish the sentence. Rimi had cut all ties with her past in order to do Shohi the honor of being his empress. It was too cruel. And his heart still hadn't accepted things yet.

Jotetsu looked out the window, pretending not to see the pain on Shohi's face.

"What did he want?" Rimi asked innocently with a slight tilt of her head.

"It's nothing, never mind. I-I'm sorry," he said, forcing a smile.

"Not at all," Rimi said with a bright smile.



Behind her smile, Rimi knew what he wanted to say. He was going to tell her that Aisha would be joining the rear palace as a symbol of the ties between their lands. But he was so concerned with her feelings that he couldn't bring himself to say it. She was happy that he was concerned about her, but she felt bad as well.

If His Majesty wants that for Konkoku, then of course he should do it.

Rimi didn't want to be empress. She wanted to support and protect Shohi.

He'd wanted her to be his empress so deeply that she'd decided to honor his request. She desperately wanted to avoid being a burden to him.

That's the one thing I don't want.

Thoughts of what future lay in store for Rimi bubbled to the surface, but she forced them away. Nothing was certain yet, and the problem was still off in the future.



As the sun began to set, the hot wind finally began to cool a bit. In the master's chambers of the Ho estate, Shusei sat at a desk and gazed intently at a burning candle. A moth, drawn by the flame, fluttered between the bamboo outside and came in through a window. It flew into the flame and fell dead onto the desk.

The moment Shusei had recognized Aisha among the delegation, he'd understood the intentions of Saisakoku's emperor. It seemed Kojin had as well. He had been quick to silence Shohi and offer Rimi as Aisha's lady-in-waiting.

The Nocturnal Liturgy was supposed to happen during Qi, but now it was as good as forgotten. It was even possible that Rimi would no longer be a candidate for empress. Only the Executive Audience had been completed. She wasn't empress yet, which meant a new empress could still be chosen.

When Shusei had realized that, he'd delivered a letter to the Wakokuan envoy.

I'm just lucky it's Qi right now. It's not much, but I've done all I can do. It will be a long time before it bears fruit, if it even does. All I can do is wait.

Thinking about his future plans, Shusei suddenly heaved a sigh.

The question right now is, what does His Majesty plan to do?

It was obvious that Shohi adored Rimi, but he was also beginning to grow as an emperor. From a duty perspective, it was far better for him to put his feelings aside and make Aisha his empress to secure ties with Saisakoku and further the nation's interests. Shohi knew that much.

Shusei wanted to make Rimi empress and secure her position. Still, one could

never expect things to go exactly as planned. Aisha's appearance had thrown the scholar's plans into chaos.

Even so, all he could do was deal with the change. His plans had been disrupted, but they had not been ruined. He just had to think of a way to turn events to his favor.

Which means it may be time to have a meeting with Prince Shar.

But a direct approach would leave the ambassador wary that Shusei was up to something. Gulzari Shar was no ordinary man. He was the face of Saisakokuan diplomacy.

"My Lord, a message from the Palace of the Water Spirit," a handmaid announced from outside the room.

Reading the message, Shusei's initial suspicion turned to surprise. It was a letter from Shar asking if the scholar might visit him at the Palace of the Water Spirit.

It raised a question. When did Shar learn that Shusei had abandoned his position as grand councilor and cuisinologist to become master of the Ho House? Shusei had been present at the meeting between the emperor and Shar's delegation. Had he noticed the change in Shusei's attire and positioning, therefore realizing that his station had changed? He could have asked around for details while taking those things into account. Or...had he already sniffed out the discord in the Konkokuan court long before he'd arrived?

Whatever the case, Shusei wondered what the prince intended to gain from meeting with him directly. He would simply have to remain vigilant. He had to meet with Shar.

He pulled out a fresh piece of paper.

It would be my honor.

Chapter 3: A Night of Secrets, a Chance Meeting of Enemies

I

It had been three days since Rimi had begun serving Aisha, but it had not taken three days to realize something about the princess.

She's a human kemari ball.

But unlike a kemari ball, which would only move when kicked and go where it was aimed, Aisha could fly in any direction without warning and there was no way of telling where she might bounce.

If Rimi let Aisha out of her sight for even a second, the girl was gone. It was anyone's guess where she would turn up after that. One time, she had been gazing down into the Jade Spring, seemingly seconds away from jumping in. Another time, she had been riding around the grounds of the palace by herself on a horse she'd demanded the stablemaster provide. And of course, there had been her attempt to crawl under the floorboards to chase after a stray cat. There was never a moment when she stood still.

Today, it had been late in the afternoon when Aisha had disappeared.

The sun had started to sink, and the slanting spears of sunlight were hot on Rimi's skin. She had staggered beneath the heat as she wandered the palace.

When Rimi finally discovered the princess, the clouds in the sky were rose red. On the edge of the Jade Spring was a vast rock garden with great stones piled to imitate the image of hills and valleys. Aisha stood atop a great rock, blissfully taking in the cool breeze that blew from the spring.

"So this is where you went," Rimi said as she braced herself against the rock with one of her hands.

Aisha tilted her head as she looked down from the top of the stone.

“What’s the matter, Rimi? You look awfully tired,” she said.

“A little rest and I’ll be all right,” Rimi said with a forced smile and slumped against the cool stone.

“Don’t overdo it, okay?” Aisha said with concern.

As much as Rimi wanted to shout at her, she seemed so unaware of *why* Rimi was exhausted that she couldn’t bring herself to.

“Oh! A sitar!” Aisha cried, suddenly perking up.

Rimi could hear something too. An exotic, quavering noise carried through the air. She looked to the gazebo that sat on the Jade Spring and saw Prince Shar playing an unfamiliar instrument that looked similar to a biwa. A Saisakokuan instrument, she guessed.

Aisha closed her eyes happily as the cool breeze and strange song came sailing across the water.

“Uncle is so wonderful with a sitar. It makes me want to dance,” she said.

The princess’s feet began to glide across the stone’s surface. It seemed like a precarious position, but her movements were confident and graceful. For a time, only her feet moved, but her slender arms suddenly joined in as she raised them high. Her hands weaved through the air above her head while her feet spun her in circles. The casual dance was fluid, gentle, and graceful.

Rimi’s mouth hung agape as she watched.

It was less a choreographed dance than an improvisational one. Aisha simply moved her body with the music in whatever way the mood took her. She moved atop the rock in a rapturous celebration of the dazzling summer sun. The warm, slanting rays of the sun lent color to her porcelain cheeks and silvery-golden hair. They made her fine golden jewelry glitter in the light.

Beautiful.

The music suddenly stopped and Aisha stopped as well, as if suddenly awoken from a dream. Rimi began to furiously applaud with glittering, awe-filled eyes. Shar had said she was a wonderful dancer, but this was beyond belief.

“Oh, thank you,” Aisha said bashfully as she descended from the rock.

“I can’t believe you won’t perform such a marvelous dance at the festival!” Rimi blurted.

Aisha’s mouth twisted into a half-frown.

“My dancing is mine. I won’t let it be used as a tool for others. I dance when I want to dance and I dance for the people I want to dance for. It is how I live, and it lets me hold my head high,” she explained.

“But it seems like such a waste. I think if you did what people asked of you, you’d be able to hold your head even higher,” Rimi said.

Dancing at the Festival of Fulfillment would let everyone see the budding friendship between their nations. It could even be a signal to other lands that only viewed Konkoku favorably to reconsider their view of Saisakoku and lead to more trade. Her dancing could be a key part of diplomacy for her homeland. Rimi thought that was something one could be incredibly proud of.

But Aisha simply snorted and turned away to head for the walkway leading back to the palace hall.

“No. If something belongs to you, it’s shameful to use it for anything other than what you want. People tell me I’m childish for saying that or that I need to grow up. If you ask me, ‘growing up’ just means compromising your values and damaging your pride.”

Is that really true?

Rimi thought that Aisha fulfilling her duty would let her be even more proud of herself and her dancing, but it was clear from the obstinate look on Aisha’s face that she didn’t feel the same.

They made their way back and were nearing the building Shar was staying in when Rihan and Keiyu came into view. They came every day to see to the ambassador’s needs and were likely on their way back.

Aisha gave a vaguely disgusted look when she spotted them.

“I hate bureaucrats. They’re so demanding. It feels like they’re looking for any chance to scold me,” she said.

Rimi wasn’t surprised to hear that Aisha was used to being scolded

considering her lack of inhibition.

“I heard we’re having a guest for dinner, so I’ll be going to Uncle’s room. Go do as you please, Rimi!” Aisha announced as the ministers neared before she darted away.

Rimi was too exhausted to run after her. But she at least knew where the princess was running off to, so she just watched Aisha leave with an uneasy smile.

There she goes, bouncing off again.

Aisha’s unpredictability was stressful, but something was charming about it as well.

Rihan and Keiyu approached Rimi while watching Aisha leave with annoyed expressions.

“Hey there, Rimi. How’s it been serving Princess Aisha?” Keiyu asked with a grin.

“It’s hard keeping up with someone so spirited, but it’s been fun,” she said.

“Well, make sure she likes you. That way she might show a little mercy when the day comes,” Keiyu said brightly.

Rimi tilted her head, unsure of what he meant. For some reason, Rihan fixed his fellow minister with a silencing glare. However, it did nothing to dissuade Keiyu.

“Oh, you must not be aware! I’m sorry, I should probably tell you, then,” he continued. “It seems that a diplomatic relationship between Konkoku and Saisakoku is all but certain. As a symbol of our new ties, Princess Aisha will join the rear palace as empress. Meaning your current position as the future empress is about to go away. Of course, you won’t be able to return to the rear palace either. You’ll end up being tucked somewhere His Majesty and Princess Aisha can’t see you.”

It felt like Rimi had been slapped. She’d known all of that already, but hearing it out loud from someone in power like the Minister of Rites made it crash down upon her.

I tried telling myself that it wasn't certain. And that even if it did happen, it wouldn't be right away. But if the Minister of Rites says it, it must be true.

"Keiyu!" Rihan said in a low, threatening voice. It did not affect Keiyu.

"Of course, we're merciful. His Majesty will certainly look after you, by which I mean he won't let you die in the street. I'd be sure to take care of a pretty girl like you too, so relax," Keiyu said. "Oh? What's wrong? You've gone pale. I'm sorry, did you not realize your position was in danger?"

"No... I did," Rimi said as she tried to force a smile.

"Oh, good! Right now, all you should be worrying about is making sure Princess Aisha has a lovely time. Keep at it," Keiyu said.

"Understood," she said.

Rimi then bowed, and Keiyu bid her farewell with a wave. As the ministers left, Rihan gave Rimi a glance, which held a sort of sympathy in it.

She was half in a daze while watching them disappear from sight.

Thinking about things wouldn't help, so Rimi tried not to think about it. She could think about things when her worries became a reality. If she had no choice but to be sad and anxious, she could do so when the time came.

...But they weren't just worries. Coming from the Minister of Rites, they were a proclamation.

I see. Well, of course I already knew that, but well, that's how it goes.

Rimi tried to take the news as casually as she could, but more fearful thoughts bubbled up from within her mind.

Lady Saigu, it seems like I'm going to lose my place in the world again.

Her vision blurred, which frustrated her. It would break Shohi's heart to know she was crying for his sake. So she had to smile and say everything was all right. Nobody could be allowed to see her tears.

Rimi began to walk quickly as she searched for somewhere she could hide.



"Keiyu!" Rihan snarled once they'd turned the corner and Rimi was fully out

of sight.

“Hm? What’s wro—”

Before Keiyu could finish his sentence, Rihan seized him by the collar and slammed the minister against one of the walkway pillars.

“Why the hell did you say that to the girl?! What was the point of going out of your way to let her know her position’s threatened by Princess Aisha?!” he demanded.

“Better she finds out now, don’t you think? I thought I was being kind,” Keiyu said.

“What happens if Rimi harms the princess to keep her position safe?” Rihan asked.

“Ha! That’d never happen. Setsu Rimi’s not strong enough to harm anybody. She’ll carry out her duty even if she has to sob her way through it. You give a girl like that an order, and she’ll just accept it as fate. It’s what’s great about her,” Keiyu explained. “Though if she *did* end up getting violent, it’d be pretty funny.”

“So in the end, you hurt her because you thought it would be funny.”

“Hurt her? I’d never! Like I said, it was a kindness. And I was joking about it being funny. But if Rimi hadn’t been made aware of the stakes, she might have let something slip about the enthronement ceremony or her relationship with His Majesty. I needed to eliminate the possibility.”

Rihan snarled but released Keiyu from his grasp.

“You really think a loose cannon like Aisha will agree to marry him?” he asked.

“I do. If that’s what the Saisakokuan emperor wants, the princess might whine and moan, but she’ll do it. She might be a princess, but she’s still just a girl. Their emperor might indulge her when she says she won’t dance, but if something truly important is on the line, he won’t be denied. I feel bad for Rimi, but there’s no fighting it. So, like I said, it’s kinder to just let her know now.”

Rihan clucked his tongue in annoyance and stomped away. Keiyu straightened his shenyi and then caught up to his fellow minister, taking a much more easygoing stride.

“I don’t like it,” Rihan said.

“But you understand it. It needed to be done,” Keiyu said with a faint smile.

Rihan was silent for a time before finally giving a disgusted nod.

“Yes, I understand it. It needed to be done. And I hate it.”



The day after Shusei had sent his response to Gulzari Shar’s letter, an official invitation had come to him from the Palace of the Water Spirit. Two days had passed since then, and the time had come for him to visit the ambassador.

In Konkoku, it was rare to call on someone at night. However, when Shar had last visited, Shusei had noticed he tended to stay up and sleep in late. In Saisakoku, where it was hot year-round, they likely preferred holding their festivities at night when it was cooler and less miserable. He must have chosen to conduct his personal business in the way he was used to.

Shusei looked at the sky. Based on the position of the moon, it was nearly time to depart.

II

The sun had set completely. The Palace of the Water Spirit’s grounds were vast. The lanterns scattered around the gardens and walkways were placed sparingly. On most nights, the estate was immersed in darkness while the night sky was reflected on the Jade Spring.

But on this night, the Jade Spring was alive with light. The gazebo that sat at the center of the spring and the walkway leading to it had been lined with braziers. It looked like a lively occasion with people coming and going. One might even call it a party.

Prince Shar does enjoy lively affairs. All Saisakokuans seem to, of course, but especially him.

Shusei could already sense the festive atmosphere coming from the little bastion against the dark.

As he followed a young Saisakokuan boy down the walkway to the gazebo, Shusei caught sight of Shar sitting at a luxurious ebony table with mother-of-pearl inlays. Shuri, who had been a part of the last delegation as well, was with him. Rimi, however, was nowhere to be seen.



“Ah, you’re here! It’s been too long, cuisinologist!” Shar called from his seat. “Ah, but then you aren’t a cuisinologist any longer, are you?”

At the prince’s call, Shusei stood across from him and gave a respectful bow.

“Thank you for your invitation, Prince Shar. And you, Princess Aisha. The last time we met, Prince Shar, I was grand councilor and went by the name Shu Shusei. But I’ve since learned the truth of my birth and formally changed my name,” Shusei explained. “I am Ho Shusei, master of the Ho House.”

“Come, come, sit!” Shar said. “Master of a great house, eh? You must be happy about that!”

As Shusei took a seat, a silver cup was placed before him and filled with red wine.

“I heard you are the greatest scholar in Konkoku. Is that true? You must be very clever,” Aisha said. Her unusual blue eyes were brimming with curiosity.

“I don’t know about that. I hardly consider myself the cleverest man in Konkoku,” Shusei said with a sheepish smile.

“Oh? What do you consider yourself, then?” she asked.

“A bit of a fool. Or an idiot as my friends have taken to calling me,” he said.

Aisha’s eyes went wide and she burst into laughter.

“You’re a funny man, Master Shusei,” she said.

“I’m just speaking the truth.”

Shusei’s earnestness just made Aisha laugh harder.

“Don’t be rude, Aisha,” Shar chided. He then lifted his own silver cup into the air. “What shall we toast to? A peaceful reign for His Imperial Majesty of Konkoku and the friendship between our lands? Are you fine with that, Shusei?”

“I don’t have a problem with that,” Shusei said.

“Oh? I’ve heard things a bit differently. From my understanding, the Ho and Ryu houses haven’t seen eye to eye in the court,” Shar said.

“Both of our houses are working to bring peace and stability to Konkoku,”

Shusei said with an artificial smile.

“I see,” Shar murmured with a smirk. He narrowed his eyes. “Well then, cheers.”

Shar raised his cup higher and Shusei joined him. Both of them emptied their cups in a single gulp.

His cup wasn't empty for a moment before Shuri refilled it with more wine. The cups began to add up as time went on, but Shusei wasn't the type to get drunk off a bit of wine. He remained mostly sober.

As the drinking went on, Aisha seemed to grow bored and left her seat.

“You know, Shusei, Saisakoku is planning on forming official diplomatic ties with Konkoku,” Shar said casually as he ran a finger along the edge of his cup.

Despite the ambassador's casual tone, this was not a subject to be taken lightly. Shusei's breath was stuck in his throat.

“Should you really be telling me something so important?” Shusei asked.

“I imagine everyone figured it out the moment they saw Aisha with me. There's no need for secrecy,” Shar said. He then flicked his gaze toward Shusei. “The question is, which one of you should I be having those talks with?”

The Ho House or the Ryu House, he means. They already know we're opposed to each other. Trying to hide it won't do any good.

With diplomatic talks going forward, Saisakoku would want to give themselves the best terms possible. By supporting whichever house would eventually rule the court, they could leverage that support into more favorable trade terms for themselves.

What Shar wanted to know was who would come out on top.

I could say 'Oh yes, the Ho House has the upper hand, so you'd be best served dealing with us,' but I doubt he'd take my word for it. He'll look at the words I choose, my attitude, and whatever other information he gathers to figure out who's in the better position.

Shar had an agreeable playfulness about him that could put people off their guard, but the man was single-handedly responsible for Saisakokuan diplomacy.

He had experience negotiating with every type of envoy and merchant. He was obviously a cutthroat diplomat.

He might be cutthroat but that doesn't mean he's the type to abandon his humanity in pursuit of profit.

Shusei wondered what the best answer was. He thought for a time before providing a careful answer.

"I plan to confront His Majesty with everything in my power to achieve my goals. As master of the Ho House, its fate and mine are intertwined. If you have any faith in my conviction, then I believe you will be able to make the right decision."

Shar's finger stopped upon the rim of his cup.

"I see," he said.

"So who do you plan to speak with?" Shusei asked.

Shar looked Shusei in the eyes and burst out laughing. He then raised his cup as if offering a toast.

"I have no idea!" he said before draining his cup.

Shusei decided it wouldn't be appropriate to stay too long, so he waited for the right moment and excused himself.

"Come back soon," Shar said with a grin.

Who will you back, Shar? His Majesty or Ho House?

The exchange hadn't given Shusei any clue as to which way the ambassador was leaning. All he could do was try to make pawns of the Saisakokuans, one way or another. If he could find out even the slightest bit in advance which way they were leaning, he'd have the time to make a decision.

Shusei wasn't particularly drunk, but he felt flushed. The night breeze from the Jade Spring was a welcome antidote to the alcohol and the day's heat.

As he followed the walkway leading around the Jade Spring and contemplated the strategic value of the Saisakokuans, Shusei eventually found himself in front of the little building by the entrance to the Cave of the Water Spirit. The door

was supposed to be closed, yet it was ajar.

Shusei went to investigate but found nobody inside. Someone must have gone into the cave.

Few people knew about the Cave of the Water Spirit. It wasn't as if its existence was a secret. It was just not a very important place. No great festivals were held there, and court priests only showed up a few times a year to hold simple rituals. There was no real reason for anyone to set foot inside. The only people who even remembered it existed were the priests and seasoned attendants who worked closely with the emperor.

And at the moment, the Saisakokuan delegation was staying in the palace. They certainly wouldn't know of its existence.

I can only think of one person staying in this palace at the moment who could find their way here...

The question was what was she doing there? Shusei didn't *need* to know, but it nagged at him.

From within the darkness of the cave, he could hear the faint sound of someone trying to fight back sobs.

Is she crying? Why? And why here?

Shusei slipped quietly down the stairs leading into the cave. With each step, the light faded and the sounds of crying grew clearer. It seemed like she hadn't noticed Shusei's presence.

The Cave of the Water Spirit was formed from a special stone that emitted light when exposed to pressure. But she was unmoving, so the cave was pitch black. Still, Shusei could tell she was there, sobbing.

He stepped down from the staircase and onto the stone floor. As he did, a blue-white light radiated from where his foot had landed, gently illuminating the cave. He could hear her gasp, and her sobs ceased.

A few steps away, hunched down in a ball, was Rimi.



When Rimi had run off looking for a place to hide from the world, the Cave of

the Water Spirit was the first spot that came to mind. It was the place where she and Shusei had once parted ways.

Rimi unbarred the temple door and rushed down the stone steps into the darkness. Once she was a few steps inside of the cave, she dropped to her knees. There, amid the soft blue light, she began to cry.

She cried and cried, unmoving from that spot for so long that the light eventually faded, plunging her back into darkness. But she continued to cry.

When Rimi was young and ashamed of her existence, she had no place to call her own. All she could remember was hiding in corners of the palace in Wakoku and sobbing. When she was sent to be with her Saigu sister, Rimi felt like she could finally be at ease. Yet she was ripped from her place. Still, she hadn't given in. She had crossed a sea, found something she was good at, and made a new place for herself. But now she was going to lose it again.

How many more times do I have to do this?

It might only have been the third time, but it had been so hard to adapt the first two times. Rimi had a hard time believing it would just end with the third. Even so, her goal was to protect and support Shohi. If she clung to him and became a burden, it would defeat the entire purpose.

Rimi knew the best choice was to just accept whatever was in store for her. She didn't want to fight it, but when she thought about losing something important all over again, she felt tired and miserable. She was afraid that her spirit would break this time.

Lady Saigu, I want to return. I want to come home to you.

Rimi just wanted to cross seas and climb mountains to get back to her sister. If only she could lay her head in her sister's lap and cry.

She wasn't sure how long she spent sitting there in the dark, but at some point, gentle blue light began to fill the cavern. Rimi looked up in surprise and suddenly felt like she might stop breathing.

Master Shusei?!

Standing there in a dark shenyi of exquisite silk was the master of the Ho

House. Their eyes met, and Rimi jumped to her feet in a panic. She took a step back and then another before finding her back against the stone wall.

“What are you doing here?” she asked sternly. Shusei was the enemy. They’d both accepted that fact, and she needed to act like it.

But he was so close, and those brilliant eyes and beautiful, slender fingers... Maybe it was the emotional chaos Rimi was in, but yearning for him bubbled up inside of her.

Master Shusei. Oh, Master Shusei.

She wanted to throw herself into his arms and cry, but she couldn’t let him see that. It would just make him despise her.

“Prince Shar invited me. I was just leaving,” Shusei said.

“Oh, I see... By all means, then. Leave,” Rimi said. The words almost caught in her throat, but she managed to force them out.

“I plan to. Answer a question for me, though. Why were you crying? Why here?”

“Why would I tell that to my enemy?”

Rimi would never tell anyone the real reason for her tears.

“Was Princess Aisha cruel to you?” Shusei asked nonchalantly.

“Don’t be ridiculous. She’s too kind for that.”

“Did someone say something cruel to you?”

“Of course not.”

Shusei paused for a moment.

“You are the empress-to-be,” he finally said.

Rimi recoiled. It was only slightly, but Shusei still seemed to notice.

“You’ve realized your position is in danger and you’re afraid of losing it,” he continued.

She felt utterly exposed. She tried to find something to say, but no words would come to her.

“I see. That’s it, isn’t it?” Shusei said with a small nod.

The light around them was weakening and soon faded completely, filling the cavern with darkness once more. They stayed there in the blackness, unmoving, just a few steps apart. All they could feel was the other person’s presence.

“Even so, you must stop crying. If His Majesty were the type to heartlessly cast you aside, I wouldn’t be standing here as your enemy right now. It’s the exact reason why I think there is a point in opposing him,” Shusei explained, his voice resonating throughout the darkness. “No matter what happens, His Majesty will find a fitting place for you. If you have any pride as a retainer, you’ll realize that.”

His words cut right through Rimi. She was wracked with anxiety, but his soft, comforting voice served as a gentle caress. As she realized Shusei was right about everything he was saying, a deep relief flooded her.

“Okay. Thank you,” she said meekly.

“There’s no point in thanking me. I’m not saying this to comfort you. I’m simply stating the truth: I wouldn’t be betting everything I have on something worthless. That’s all,” he said.

Neither of them could see the other in the darkness. Yet they were so close, all they would have to do was reach out an arm and they could touch. They could even hear the slight sound of clothes shifting.

But Rimi couldn’t reach for him. It would not soften the hard edge in his voice, and the days when she could speak kindly to him were gone as well. They were within arm’s reach of each other, and yet they were separated by an infinite void.

The cavern filled with light as Shusei turned to leave. Rimi gazed up at his back as he climbed the stairs.

Master Shusei...

The turmoil within her heart had turned to calm.

He’s right. His Majesty isn’t that cruel. There’s no need to cry. I just need to stay strong and believe in His Majesty. Isn’t that right, Master Shusei?



Shusei's body was on fire as he left the cave, and not just because of the liquor. No matter how much he tried to stamp out the embers of love and longing for Rimi, they continued to smolder.

I didn't need to do that. She'd have found her way eventually without a single word from me. That wasn't what you're supposed to say to an enemy.

He never should have seen her crying to begin with. After telling himself that he needed to be harsher with her, he had left her alone in the cave.

Shusei looked out at the Jade Spring's dark surface as he traveled along the walkway, feeling as if he'd just been awakened from a dream.

Lanterns burned in various places along the walkway. As Shusei was walking, he spotted someone up ahead in one of the pools of light. They were perched on the walkway's railing and dressed in exotic finery.

"Princess Aisha?" Shusei asked.

She turned to look at him with her glittering blue eyes. When she realized who it was, she hopped down from the railing with a look of surprise.

"I'd assumed you'd gone to bed. What's wrong? What are you doing out here?" Shusei asked.

"Oh, I'm not the least bit tired. I just figured Uncle was going to start talking politics, and I didn't want to be bored, so I left," Aisha explained. "I was hoping to spend time with Rimi, but I haven't been able to find her anywhere. I'm just so bored. Would you like to join me? Can you play any instruments?"

"I'm afraid I was just leaving."

"Well, you're no fun," Aisha said. She then stared up at Shusei. It felt like she was trying to stare right through him.

"Do I have something on my face?" Shusei asked with an embarrassed smile.

"No. I'm just wondering who you are, exactly," she said, punctuating her sentence with a sharp poke to Shusei's chest.

"I'm not sure how to answer that question," Shusei said, tilting his head in confusion. "The master of the Ho House?"

“No, that’s not what I mean,” Aisha said.

“Then what do you mean?”

Aisha placed a hand on her chin and thought in silence for a moment. Then, she shook her head slightly.

“I’m not sure how to put it. You just seem...twisted?”

“Twisted? Well, if you happen to figure out what you mean by that, be sure to let me know,” Shusei said. He then bowed and bid her farewell.

As he departed, he found himself admiring the young girl’s surprising intuition. Perhaps it was her youth that let her see to the heart of things without getting distracted.

I have to be twisted to achieve my goals, Princess Aisha.

III

“P-Princess Aishaaaa! Wait! Please! Just give me a minute!” Rimi whimpered as she staggered through the streets of Annei.

Aisha finally and blessedly came to a stop in front of an apothecary’s stall that was packed with dried medicinal herbs.

“You really need to work on your stamina, Rimi,” Aisha said.

“Not everyone has endless reserves of energy like you,” Rimi responded between heaving breaths as she finally caught up with the princess.

Rimi knew she wouldn’t survive if this went on much longer, so she abandoned propriety and grabbed Aisha by the wrist.

Soldiers stood guard from a respectable distance, creating a circle around them. Kyo Kunki, who was usually tasked with personally guarding the emperor, had also been assigned to Aisha and stuck fast by her side. He was an upstanding man with smooth, round cheeks that gave the impression of a shiny boiled egg. At the moment, the well-raised bodyguard looked unhappy.

“It’s wonderful that you’re in such good health, but our soldiers can’t

maintain formation with you running in every different direction. It would be greatly appreciated if you could take things a little bit slower,” Kunki complained, albeit politely.

Aisha simply shrugged.

“I don’t need a ridiculous escort like this in the first place. If you can’t keep up, then feel free to find somewhere to rest,” she said.

“We couldn’t possibly!” Kunki said in shock.

“Princess Aisha?” Rimi interrupted, offering a smile as she tried to catch her breath. “I’d love to go sightseeing with you. I’ve never gotten to do it myself. Do you think you could stay with me?”

“You’ve never been sightseeing either? You should’ve said so sooner! Let’s go!” Aisha said before grabbing Rimi’s arm and breaking into a skip. Luckily, she went slower this time.

That morning, Aisha had suddenly declared that she wanted to go sightseeing. It had been seven days since her arrival in Konkoku, and she was apparently growing bored.

“Then sightseeing we shall go,” Prince Shar had said casually, clearly having a soft spot for his niece.

It was the Konkokuans who’d been sent into a panic by the idea. If something happened to the delegation while they were in town, it would be a disaster. Keiyu and Rihan had hurriedly put together a military escort and sent them running after the capricious Saisakokuans.

The ministers had also decided to select Kyo Kunki to serve as a guard for the princess. Kunki had been unhappy with the assignment from the start, but it was explained that sending the personal bodyguard of the emperor to guard the princess would be an indirect way of showing that Konkoku considered Aisha to be as important as Shohi.

The sun beat down on the streets of Annei. Some areas were so busy that a fine haze of dust had risen. The screech of cicadas agitated by the heat and the voices of hawkers mixed to form an absolute cacophony. A poultry dealer here had live chickens that beat their wings violently within their baskets. A steamed

bun salesman there had placed a basket atop a makeshift stove, which was now plumed with steam. A stall had been set up to sell dried goods, stocked with everything from dried scallops to unrecognizable species of lizard.

Aisha looked at everything with wide, shining eyes, dragging Rimi behind her the entire way. If Rimi had learned one thing in her time attending to Aisha, it was that she'd never heard of a princess in Konkoku or Wakoku who was nearly as spirited.

Rimi was hot, thirsty, and worrying that her legs were about to give out from exhaustion when Aisha announced she was a bit tired. Rimi delightedly suggested they take a break.

The Konkokuans had prepared a high-end teahouse for their exclusive use, so the pair made their way to it. When they arrived, they found Shar already there, relaxing on the second floor of the teahouse.

“Oh, Uncle! Taking a break already?”

All the windows on the second floor had been opened, letting a pleasant breeze blow through. Alongside a window offering a view of the street below was Shar, who sipped tea at a table. Shuri was beside him. Keiyu and Rihan were also present at the table.

As Aisha joined the group, a serving girl placed a cup of tea before her. While Rimi was groggy from the heat and exhaustion, she chose to stay by the wall instead, away from the others.

“Are you all right, Lady Rimi?” Kunki asked worriedly.

“I’m fine. Thank you for asking,” she replied.

“You’re the future empress. How could they make you serve as some handmaid? His Majesty, the chancellor, the ministers... I don’t understand what any of them are thinking.”

“It’s fine,” Rimi said, meeting the bodyguard’s gloomy expression with a strained smile. “I’d much rather be doing this than sitting around with nothing to do.”

“But—” he began.

However, Kunki was interrupted as Shuri approached.

“Here, you must drink this. You are tired, yes?” he said, offering her a cup of water.

Rimi accepted it gratefully. She was surprised to find it had a pleasant floral scent as she lifted it to her lips.

“This smells good,” she said.

“I added a few drops of a Saisakokuan liquor that we call Lion’s Tears to the water. It is very good when you are feeling hot. Even though it is alcohol, it has a sharp taste that will wipe the sweat away,” he explained.

Rimi took a drink. While it smelled sweet, it felt curiously cool and refreshing as she swallowed it.

“You are having a difficult time serving Princess Aisha, yes? You always look troubled when you are with her and Prince Shar,” he said.

“Is the princess always like this?” Kunki asked with a touch of surprise.

“Yes, always,” Shuri said.

“I’m so sorry to hear that,” the bodyguard said, hanging his head in apparent sympathy.

“It is Prince Shar who is the troublesome one!” Shuri said with a laugh. “I must always hear his complaining.”

At the table, Aisha was gesturing wildly as she regaled the others with the interesting things she’d seen and heard in town. Shar was watching with a delighted smile when something seemed to occur to him.

“Ah, that’s right!” he said and pulled out a golden hairpin, which he set on the table.

Aisha squealed excitedly as she looked at the hairpin with glittering eyes.

A series of tiny pearls had been bound together with golden metalwork to create a number of slender, interwoven chains. A comb was affixed to each end. It was designed so the chains would dangle between the combs when they were placed in two different places within the wearer’s hair. The chains

glittered and jangled with every movement.

“I found this while perusing an artisan’s workshop. It was so lovely that I thought I should buy it for you,” Shar said.

“It’s beautiful! I love it, Uncle!” Aisha exclaimed, holding the hairpin lovingly to her cheek.

“I want you to wear it when you dance at the Festival of Fulfillment. You’ll be radiant,” he said.

Aisha met her uncle’s smile with a glare and smashed the hairpin down on the table, which drew a shocked cry from Shuri. The force of the blow was enough to dislodge one of the pearls and send it skittering across the floor.

A troubled look arose in the prince’s eyes.

“I already told you! I’m not going to dance!”

Shuri gathered up the fallen pearl, went to Aisha’s side, and set it down on the table beside her with a loud *clack*. He then said something to the royal princess in Saisakokuan with a shockingly harsh tone. Aisha rose to her feet and said something back.

“Lady Rimi, isn’t that boy a cook? That’s what I’d heard. It seems like he’s speaking his mind to the princess,” Kunki whispered, dumbfounded.

“He is. He’s a cook,” Rimi said, equally shocked.

Rimi knew Shar to be an open-hearted man who didn’t discriminate based on class or status. Even so, a cook in his employ couldn’t be allowed to speak to an imperial princess like that. Keiyu and Rihan were both staring wide-eyed at the exchange.

Prince Shar said something in Saisakokuan, which made both Aisha and Shuri freeze in place before looking angrily away from each other. Shuri bowed to those at the table and then retreated to a place by the wall.

“Please, forgive that disgraceful display,” Aisha said, sitting back down at the table and bowing her head to the ministers.

With the mood spoiled, the Saisakokuans decided to return to the Palace of

the Water Spirit. When they arrived, Aisha stormed off to her room, buried herself completely beneath a blanket, and refused to move from the spot. It must have been sweltering under there, but no matter how much Rimi tried to coax her out, Aisha stubbornly refused.

Rimi decided a different strategy was in order.

Maybe I should make her some sweets to put her in a better mood.

Since Rimi didn't know what sort of food Aisha liked, she decided to seek out Shuri. She found him in the gardens, gazing out at the Jade Spring with his head hanging low.

"Shuri?" Rimi called.

"Oh. Rimi," he said quietly before wrapping his arms around his knees and resting his chin atop them.

Rimi crouched down beside him.

The sun was still high in the sky, making the water's ripples sparkle with dazzling silver light.

"What's wrong? Did Prince Shar yell at you about what happened at the teahouse?" Rimi asked.

"No, he did not yell. He never yells at me. He just looked sad. But I could not take her words. She says these selfish things and it causes trouble for Prince Shar, so I told her that she is selfish. But I went too far, so...I think she hates me now," Shuri said.

Shuri wasn't the formal, upstanding sort of retainer. He loved his master the way one would love a parent. It was only natural for him to get upset sometimes.

Suddenly, someone appeared behind the pair of them, casting a shadow across their backs.

"So this is where you were, Shuri. I've been looking for you."

Rimi looked back with an uneasy smile to find Prince Shar towering over them. Both Rimi and Shuri jumped to their feet and bowed to Shar in their Konkokuan and Saisakokuan styles respectively.

“Forgive me for before, Prince Shar. I said too much,” Shuri said in Konkokuan, likely out of politeness to Rimi. The prince followed suit.

“It’s fine. I know you did it out of consideration for me. Aisha doesn’t understand what it really means to be royalty yet. She doesn’t see the responsibility involved. She is still very much a child, so I hope you can forgive her for being a spoiled princess. But she is a princess nonetheless, and as your master, I have to punish you for your actions,” Shar said.

“I understand...” Shuri said, dropping his head low.

“As punishment, you must make the princess something she loves. Something especially for her,” the prince whispered.

“Huh?!” Shuri cried. He’d been bracing himself, wondering what punishment was waiting for him.

“Get to it,” Shar said. He then patted his servant’s head and departed.

Relief bloomed on Shuri’s face as he watched his master leave.

It was heartwarming for Rimi to see such a kind relationship between a master and their servant.

“Hey, Shuri. I was thinking of making something for Aisha to improve her mood too. Would you like to make something together?” she said.

“Yes, I would like to make something as soon as possible, so please help me. I went too far with Princess Aisha,” he pleaded.

Rimi could tell he truly felt bad about it. Maybe gentle persuasion was more effective than scolding when it came to making someone see their own flaws.

They both left the gardens and made their way to the kitchen.

“What shall we make?” Rimi asked.

“Burfi. Princess Aisha loves it. Do you know about it? It is a sweet made by boiling down cow’s milk in a pot. It takes a lot of time to make, so I would appreciate your help,” Shuri said.

Dinner preparations hadn’t yet begun, so the kitchen was still empty. As a special exception during the Saisakokuan delegation’s stay in the Palace of the

Water Spirit, Shuri was responsible for cooking all meals, so this had become his temporary workspace. The Konkokuans had stocked the pantries full, and Shuri had brought an abundance of spices from his homeland.

“First, we put milk in a heavy pot and heat it,” Shuri explained as he worked, pouring the pure white milk into a smallish pot and placing it on the stove. As bubbles began to form on the surface, he used a wooden spoon to stir the contents at the bottom of the pot.

“We must keep stirring so it does not burn until it becomes thick. Your arm will get very tired. So it is nice to have someone to switch places with, which is why I am happy you are helping,” he continued.

“It must take a while,” Rimi said.

She’d never done anything like this before. Using cow’s milk as an ingredient was rare in Wakoku, so she didn’t have much experience with it.

“When the milk starts to get thick, we reduce the heat and add sugar and crushed, roasted legumes. Then we put it in a flat mold and let it cool. It is sweet and melts in your mouth,” Shuri explained.

They took turns stirring for a long time. Rimi was standing there, stirring and wondering how long it was going to take, when she sensed someone near the entrance. As she turned to look, she saw someone duck into the shadow of a pillar. However, a lovely piece of cloth remained peeking out from behind it.

“Shuri, could I just...?” Rimi whispered, realizing who was watching them. Shuri responded with a nod.

Rimi handed him the spoon and went over to the pillar.

“Princess Aisha? Is something wrong?” Rimi asked, peeking around the pillar with a smile.

Princess Aisha, who had her back planted firmly against the pillar and was trying to make herself look as small as possible, was beet red.

Chapter 4: In the Rear Palace

I

“No, nothing’s wrong. I just came out of my room and you were gone, and I was wondering what happened, so I went to your room, but you weren’t there either, so I asked Uncle if he saw you, and he said he was pretty sure you were in the kitchen, so I just came here to check. That’s all,” Aisha explained.

“Shuri’s making your burfi, you know,” Rimi said. She then decided to take a page from Aisha’s book, dragging the young princess by the hand over to the stove.

Aisha reluctantly followed along, eventually coming to stand behind Shuri as he continued stirring the pot. Rimi patted Shuri on the back and traded positions with him.

As Shuri turned around, the princess took a shocked half-step backward.

“Princess Aisha...here,” Shuri said as he pulled the golden hairpin from his breast pocket. “I did something rude before. Please forgive me. But this hairpin is a symbol of Prince Shar’s care. It has done no wrong, so please take it. I reattached the missing pearl.”

Aisha hesitantly accepted the hairpin and gave a small nod. She seemed to say something, but it was mumbled too low to be intelligible.

She’s here because Prince Shar told her Shuri was here.

Shar had likely chastised the princess for her selfish behavior, and she’d now come to apologize to Shuri. But she was too embarrassed to actually say it. However, the young cook’s expression softened, seemingly satisfied by her apologetic attitude.

“Princess Aisha, you love burfi, right? Would you like to see how it’s made?” Rimi said as she continued stirring the pot.

“Oh, I know how to make it. As a matter of fact, I’ll help,” Aisha said as the

glimmer returned to her eyes.

She tucked the hairpin into her pocket and took the wooden spoon from Rimi's hand. She then began to stir the pot with a practiced motion.

"You know what you are doing, Princess Aisha!" Shuri said in surprise with wide eyes.

Aisha lifted her chin proudly and chuckled at the compliment.

"Mother would only eat the burfi that my nanny and I made. I've made it many times," she said.

"Wow! You must make really good burfi, then," Rimi said.

"Oh no, it's not as if I'm amazing at it. Mother's just worried about bugs, and —"

"Bugs?" Rimi asked in surprise.

Aisha froze for a moment and her expression turned gloomy. Rimi was confused by the pained look on her beautiful face. The princess stirred in silence for some time.

"When Mother joined the palace, bugs started appearing in her burfi. Not just one or two either. Ever since then, she'll only eat burfi made by those she trusts."

"Why would anyone do that?!" Rimi cried.

Shuri frowned as if he knew something.

"What do you think about the color of my skin?" Aisha asked.

"Huh? Well, it's shockingly beautiful? It looks like porcelain," Rimi said.

"Many from the northwestern lands have skin like this. Saisakokuans have lovely dark skin, like Uncle or Shuri. My mother was a northwesterner," Aisha explained. "My father took an interest in her when she was a dancing girl and made her his eighth wife. Since people in our court are obsessed with status and Mother was a dancing girl with no status and a northwesterner, she was treated wretchedly," Aisha explained.

"Obsessed with status? But what about you and Prince Shar?" Rimi asked.

From the way both of them treated Shuri and others, Rimi had gathered that Saisakokuans were much more relaxed about status than Konkokuans.

“As I said before, Prince Shar is special,” Shuri chimed in. “Prince Shar and Princess Aisha are the only royals who will let us appear before them. If we even speak to the royal family, we are sentenced to death by hanging.”

“Just for talking to them?! Konkoku has a strict ranking system, but not even they’re that bad!” Rimi exclaimed.

“We have no such ranking system in Saisakoku. It is very convenient for people who enjoy being cruel. All of the emperor’s other wives say ‘well, she is a northwesterner!’ But it is not just the royal family,” Shuri said. “The handmaids and attendants follow their masters’ examples. If there was a ranking system like Konkoku, it would be much harder for such people to say these things.”

“As the only princess, I’m a political pawn, so Father ordered that I be treated well,” Aisha added. “Everyone in the court may follow his orders, but I see the hatred in their eyes. It’s always been like that. Mother and I have no place in the world. It feels like we’re constantly being told to get out. If they hate us that much, they should just let us leave. But they won’t.”

Aisha kept her beautiful blue eyes fixated on a single point. She seemed to be trying to keep her emotions under control. Rimi’s heart broke for her.

Princess Aisha’s just like me... But no, that’s not true. She’s in so much more pain than me.

Once, Rimi had felt like a nuisance to everyone around her. She’d felt ashamed of her very existence. When she’d come to Konkoku, I Bunryo had looked at her with such disdain for being from Wakoku. It crushed her when she’d been accused of thievery for being Wakokuan. But she’d had Shusei to protect her then.

Aisha, like Rimi, had been told over and over that she didn’t belong. But at the same time, she was told she wasn’t allowed to leave. Rimi was at a loss for words.

“I am going to take the pot off the fire,” Shuri cut in, lifting it from in front of

Aisha and placing it on a counter.

The milk had been reduced by a third and had grown sticky. He added some crushed, roasted legumes to the mix and began to stir.

“Someday, I’ll be sent away and wed to someone as a political pawn. If that’s what the court wants, then I’m fine with it,” Aisha said firmly as she watched Shuri stir. “If they want to be cruel and lock me up until the day they can get rid of me, then in exchange, I’ll take advantage of their outward politeness to maintain my pride as long as I can. They can order me to dance, but they cannot make me dance. My dancing is mine. It’s the only thing I have power over, so I will choose whether or not I dance.”

She stopped for a moment before giving a prideful laugh.

“Or maybe I’ll crush all their little schemes. I could act like Uncle and run off to a foreign land. Maybe I could find a place to live happily, laugh at the courts scampering, and dance however I pleased,” Aisha mused.

Surely she knew that was impossible. Saying such things made her seem like a spoiled child.

Shuri finished stirring and began to pour the mixture into a flat mold.

“But that would be selfish. You are a royal. You need to follow your destiny,” the cook said under his breath as he worked.

“You don’t understand what it’s like, Shuri. You get to go wherever you want with Uncle,” Aisha said with a pout.

“You are right. I do not understand,” he said, shaking his head.

The princess may have been energetic and uninhibited, doing everything without concern or doubt, but that didn’t mean she was free from worries. Underneath it all, she was in pain and used her pride as a shield.

She clings to pride and calls it freedom, but I don’t think her stubbornness is doing her any good. I think she would feel more free if she could find her own place in the world. I wish there was something I could do for her.

Aisha wore a strong expression, but there was a lack of confidence in her eyes. She seemed a bit annoyed by Shuri calling her selfish. But pointing out her

stubbornness wouldn't accomplish anything. Her pride was what let her hold her head high. Letting go of it would end up crushing her.

That must be so painful.

As Rimi tried to think of something she could do to help, an idea occurred to her.

"Oh, I know! Would you like to go have some fun tomorrow? I know somewhere great we can take these treats," she said.

"Where?" Aisha asked curiously.

"The rear palace!" Rimi declared with a giggle. Aisha's eyes widened in surprise.

Rimi thought it could be good for the princess to meet some other women who carried themselves with pride, and she happened to know the four proudest women in Konkoku.

The four consorts were able to carry themselves with pride without suffering for it. If Aisha could meet women like that, perhaps it would help lighten her burden. At the very least, spending time talking with the consorts would be fun.

The next day, Rimi and Aisha made their way to the rear palace with burfi in hand. Rimi had sent a letter to Hakurei announcing that she would like to prepare tea and snacks for the four consorts. It had apparently come as a surprise to the eunuch because he'd immediately come to the Palace of the Water Spirit to ask for more information. Once Hakurei had understood Rimi's plan, he'd happily accepted and had the Palace of Northern Peaks prepared for them.

The four consorts were already waiting at the Palace of Northern Peaks when the pair arrived. They were looking out on the gardens and seemed to be making small talk. When Rimi appeared with Aisha alongside her, all of their eyes went wide.

"Allow me to make introductions. These are the four consorts, and this is Imperial Princess Aisha of Saisakoku," Rimi said with an enormous smile.

The consorts remained dumbfounded. Rimi guessed they weren't shocked by the princess's beauty, but by Rimi's gushing introduction of her.

"Good day to all of you. I am Aisha. It is an absolute pleasure to meet you," Aisha said in flawless Konkoku with a fearless smile. She then dipped down at the knees in a traditional Saisakoku bow.

"N-Now hold on just a moment! Lady of Precious Bevy Setsu, come here at once!" Noble Consort So snapped. She was the first to recover her senses, after which she grabbed Rimi by the wrist and pulled her over to the walkway leading out into the gardens. The other consorts crowded around in a panic as well.

"Are you insane or just stupid?!" So hissed once they were out on the walkway.

Rimi blinked in surprise.

"Huh? I mean, I don't think I'm the smartest person around, but—"

"Don't give us that. You know why she's here in Konkoku, don't you?" Virtuous Consort Ho asked with dismay.

"You mean the fact that Saisakoku is serious about forming diplomatic ties with Konkoku, so they plan on sending Princess Aisha to His Majesty as a consort to secure their relationship?" Rimi asked.

"But dearest, if you understand, then how could you bring her here like nothing's wrong?! Oh dear, you haven't even thought about what position she'll take in the rear palace, have you?" Pure Consort Yo asked in a panic.

"They wouldn't dare make her anything other than empress. That's what the Minister of Rites said," Rimi said with a smile.

"The Minister of Rites said that?" Worthy Consort On said, turning pale. If he'd said as much, it didn't matter if things weren't official yet, they might as well have been.

"Yes, I heard it from his own mouth," Rimi responded.

The consorts all exchanged glances and then began to look around as if unsure what to say next.

The consorts know as well as I do that it's all but done. If they're serious about

their duties as His Majesty's retainers, they'll understand how important it is for Princess Aisha to join the rear palace.

Still, Rimi understood the conflict they were feeling. They may have understood, but that didn't mean they were happy about Rimi losing her position. She was anxious too. And sad. And scared. But Shusei had said His Majesty was worth confronting, even if it meant betting everything on it. She had been able to pick herself up and focus on believing in Shohi and doing her duty without giving in to her fears and doubts.

Rimi smiled brightly.

"I believe in His Majesty and I know that no matter what happens, it will be all right. Right now, I just want Princess Aisha to have a good time. Could you help me with that?"

II

Shohi hated the endless procession of audiences that came with Qi. He didn't mind meeting with the foreign delegations, but dressing up and going to the Hall of New Harmony every time was a hassle.

Today was the first time in a while that no audiences were scheduled. All he had planned was an afternoon meeting with his council. The emperor was feeling so relaxed that he'd even slept in that morning. Since he'd slept in so late, he had his attendants help him dress. However, Jotetsu was nowhere to be seen. Shohi wondered where his bodyguard might have gone. He had just finished his breakfast and was starting to grow worried when Jotetsu finally appeared in his chambers

"Where were you, Jotetsu? And why are you making that face?" Shohi asked from his sofa.

"It's, uh, it's Rimi," Jotetsu said.

"What about Rimi?"

Jotetsu was about to respond when Hakurei entered the room.

“Pardon the sudden intrusion, Your Majesty. I come with news,” the eunuch said with a grin. “Setsu Rimi has gone to the rear palace and is enjoying tea with the four consorts. Would you like to go join them?”

For some reason, Jotetsu gave Hakurei a suspicious glare.

“Rimi’s come to the rear palace?!” Shohi said, overjoyed at the unexpected news.

Ever since he had realized the truth behind Aisha’s visit, Shohi had felt uncomfortable with the idea of seeing Rimi, but he missed seeing her dumbfounded expression. He knew that as emperor, he’d have to marry Aisha eventually. He knew it would solidify his rule and secure his position. He would never be able to face up to his retainers if he didn’t. Though Rimi would probably smile and say “I don’t mind.”

It was exactly what made his heart ache. He had lost Shusei to have her by his side, and now he was going to lose her too?

Shohi knew Rimi wouldn’t be able to rejoin the rear palace at the risk of upsetting the empress. The only choice he would have would be to grant her somewhere to live outside of the palace and watch over her. If he cared for her with everything in his being, he doubted she would bear a grudge against him.

But he would never have that coveted place inside her heart. He knew Rimi didn’t hate him, but he also knew she hadn’t agreed to be empress because she was wildly in love with him either. It was why he had wanted to make her empress in the first place, so she would be close by his side and belong to no one else. Then he had hoped that someday he would win her heart with his love and sincerity.

But how could that ever happen if Shohi gave up on her? If he couldn’t even have her beside him? She would never wrap him in her arms and tell him that he was the most important thing in her world.

Even if I do marry Aisha, it’s not like it’s happening tomorrow.

The emperor hoped that seeing Rimi’s face would soothe the ache in his heart. It also occurred to him that he’d been so flustered that he hadn’t found time to see the four consorts either. This seemed like the perfect opportunity to

do both.

Shohi rose from his seat.

“I’d like to see Rimi and the four consorts. I am going to the rear palace.”



Shohi quickly left the room and made his way down the walkway. Hakurei went to follow him, but Jotetsu rushed over and seized the eunuch by the arm.

“What are you planning?” Jotetsu demanded.

“What do you mean, exactly?” Hakurei asked with a tilt of his head.

Jotetsu clenched his jaw.

“Rimi wasn’t the only one who went to the rear palace. The princess from Saisakoku was with her, but you sent His Majesty there without telling him. So again, what are you planning?”

“Oh, you knew?”

“I serve His Majesty. I know what Rimi’s doing. What’s got me scratching my head is why she’s bringing the princess with her to the rear palace. She’s the girl that’s threatening her position, and it’s like Rimi’s going out of her way to introduce the princess to the rear palace. Is this some scheme of yours?”

“Rimi came to me to ask permission, so I gave it. As for not telling His Majesty about the princess, he obviously would’ve been reluctant to go if he knew she was there,” Hakurei calmly explained.

“So you’re trying to get His Majesty and the princess together? But why?”

“If they’re going to be wed, it’s better if they’re on friendly terms, don’t you think?” Hakurei explained.

“And you don’t care about what happens to Rimi?” Jotetsu demanded, squeezing down on Hakurei’s hand.

Hakurei’s expression grew slightly pained, but he remained composed.

“I don’t know what will end up happening to her, but His Majesty marrying the princess is of far more importance. That’s politics. I’m sorry about Rimi, but we can’t trade the government’s well-being for one girl’s,” he said.

“Is that right? Still the little noble boy, aren’t you? You care more about politics than someone important to you. But I’m not a noble like you. I’m just a spy,” Jotetsu spat out bitterly as he shoved Hakurei away.

“I think you’ve said enough,” Hakurei said with a fierce glare.

The eunuch then turned away and chased after Shohi. Jotetsu heaved a sigh and went to sit on the windowsill.

“Tch. Politics,” he grumbled.

The world of politics was a cruel place where sometimes you had to sacrifice everything, your emotions, your honor, your sense of justice, to make it through. It was too cruel a world for Jotetsu. His heart got in the way. He’d tried to silence his emotions, but he’d ended up defying his own father because of his bond with Shohi and Shusei.

But Shohi and Shusei aren’t like me. They were born into that world.

Jotetsu knew exactly how cruel a fate that was. It was why he wanted to help them. He felt it was his duty to stay by their sides and maintain those bonds.

“What are you gonna do, Rimi?” he mumbled.



The sweat wouldn’t stop pouring down Rimi’s back. She wasn’t sweating from the intense summer heat, however. It was a cold sweat, through and through.

Should I be letting this happen?

It wasn’t just Rimi wearing a tense expression. Consorts So, On, and Ho all sat with her around the central table looking dreadfully pale.

“You’re amazing, Princess Aisha!” Consort Yo exclaimed gleefully. The princess chuckled proudly in response.

They were the only ones enjoying themselves.

The pair stood facing each other on the walkway leading out of the main hall, about twenty paces apart. In Yo’s hand was a bowl piled with dried sweets.

“I can do this all day,” Aisha said, puffing out her chest.

“Do it again, then!” Yo said excitedly and grabbed a dried confectionery from

the bowl, which she then hurled at Aisha.

The princess was quick on her feet and gracefully positioned herself to catch the treat in her mouth. Yo squealed with delight, and Aisha gave an elegant and confident bow.

Rimi and the others were growing paler by the moment.

No! I shouldn't be letting this happen at all! She's making the imperial princess of Saisakoku do acrobatics!

Of course, it was Aisha herself who'd proclaimed she was able to do it.

When Rimi had served the burfi that they'd made the day before with some tea, the consorts had all responded positively. The sweet, melty treats were perfect for the hot, exhausting weather.

Rimi had then mentioned that Aisha had assisted in making it. The consorts had heaped praise on her, which had put the princess in an even better mood. She'd grabbed the pile of treats and handed it to Yo before heading out onto the walkway. She'd then instructed Yo to throw treats at her while Aisha hopped around, snapping them up.

The innocent Yo was delighted, but Rimi and the other consorts had gone cold despite the heat.

"Come on, speed it up! Throw a bunch in a row!" Aisha insisted, deepening the onlookers' fear.

"Really? Should I?" Yo hesitated.

"It's fine!" Aisha insisted.

It's not fine!

Rimi was confident she wasn't the only one screaming internally. But Yo didn't seem to notice the other consorts' pale complexions or wide, pleading eyes.

"Okay then! Here we go!" she said and began to toss treats one after another at the princess.

Aisha was light on her feet as she dipped and darted, catching every treat in

her mouth. It was an impressive sight.

“I’ve never seen anything like this,” Ho murmured.

“Neither have I,” On said with a slight nod. “Well...there was that time I was visiting So at the Palace of Great Beauty...”

So, who seemed unable to do anything but laugh at this point, began to giggle.

“That’s true. My sweet puppy Ranran does a very similar trick!” she said.

The group kept on watching the unbelievable display in despair.

Aisha’s clothes fluttered and swirled as she moved. Her arms pinwheeled to help her maintain her balance, and her feet twisted and moved in an elaborate dance. The longer they watched, the more it seemed like an improvised dance, and Rimi eventually found herself loving the display.

At the other end of the walkway was the Palace of Northern Peaks’s gardens. The sun shone brightly on the verdant greenery, which gave Aisha a backdrop for her fluttering dance. Her jewelry glittered with light reflected from the pond. What should’ve been a silly parlor trick turned into an elegant display of acrobatics.

They were watching the Jewel of Saisha, after all. She was such a skilled dancer, even erratic tumbles became a florid dance in her hands. As Rimi and the others watched the display, their dread steadily turned to awe.

Aisha and Yo were simply having fun. The brilliant sun illuminated the princess’s smiling face. Rimi had never seen a more beautiful woman in her life. Yet at that moment, she seemed more “cute” than beautiful.

“She’s amazing,” Rimi mumbled to herself.

“I’m certainly amazed. I’ve never seen a noblewoman jumping around like an acrobat before,” Shohi said in disgust from behind Rimi.

The consorts all looked up in shock to see the emperor and Hakurei both looking toward the walkway with dismay.

“This is certainly something. I’ve never seen anything like it. What is that girl thinking?” Shohi continued.

“Your Majesty?!” they all cried, jumping to their feet and bowing.

Yo and Aisha suddenly stopped moving. The last treat bounced and rolled across the floor of the walkway.

The Pure Consort bowed on the spot, but Aisha simply stood there chewing with an annoyed expression, looking as if someone had just spoiled her fun.

“Hakurei, why didn’t you tell me Aisha was here?” Shohi demanded as he stared intently at the princess.

“Did I not mention it? It must have slipped my mind,” Hakurei said with a smile.

“Tch. You planned this,” the emperor said as his expression grew colder. “And you, princess. What are you doing?”

“Can’t you tell? I’m having fun,” Aisha said. She swallowed her food and approached the emperor fearlessly.

“It looked to me like you were treating my four consorts and Rimi to an acrobatic performance. What happened to the princess who wouldn’t dance at the Festival of Fulfillment because she wouldn’t be a spectacle? Did I imagine her?” Shohi said.

Shohi had clearly decided that there was no point in holding back, considering Aisha had chosen to be rude from the start. Every word dripped with venom.

“I am more than happy to dance and tumble for people who I *want* to perform for,” Aisha answered, her tone as thorny as the emperor’s.

“You ignore the orders given to you as an imperial princess, but you’ll happily follow your whims? Where’s your sense of responsibility?” Shohi snapped back.

Rimi was in a panic and looked at the emperor desperately, silently pleading for him to stop. But the emperor’s glare was focused entirely on Aisha. The consorts exchanged glances as well, wondering if they should try to control him and looking for an opportunity to do so.

“My dance is mine and mine alone. I dance for myself, not for it to be used by anyone. I’m proud of that fact. ‘Do this, do that, don’t do this, don’t do that.’ I spend my entire life being ordered around. This is my one freedom, and I’ll

protect it,” Aisha said.

Shohi narrowed his eyes and stared at her with a cold gaze.

“Your freedom and your pride are cheap, childish things.”

III

“Cheap?!” Aisha exclaimed.

The emperor and the princess were locked in a mutual glare. As Shohi’s anger grew, his eyes began to narrow.

“Your obsession with freedom proves how childish you are. I am an emperor. I have to do what’s right for my land and the people who support me. I don’t have time for your self-serving ‘freedom.’ I have responsibilities, and they’re what give *me* pride. My freedom is in my decision to carry out my duties with pride. Your freedom and your pride are meaningless and empty,” Shohi lectured. “Ah, but it all makes sense now. Of course a shrew like you doesn’t have a care in the world. It’s because nothing means anything to you.”

“Did you just call me a *shrew*?!”

“I called a shrew a shrew. What of it?”

Hakurei’s shoulders sank in despair as he listened to Shohi repeatedly spit the word at Aisha. The defeat and resignation in his eyes were clear.

“Your Majesty, please stop!” Rimi pleaded desperately. It was her turn to be on the receiving end of the emperor’s glare.

“This is all your fault to begin with,” he snarled, drawing an injured look from Rimi. He then turned his ire back toward the princess. “If you want to crow about your freedom and your pride while refusing to dance at the festival, be my guest. Your hollow selfishness isn’t going to have any impact on me or my land. But your uncle is here because he has a duty to fulfill, isn’t he?”

For the first time, Aisha looked shaken, the color draining from her face as she looked away.

“If you decide you feel like fulfilling your responsibilities as a princess, let me know. That’s all I have to say to you,” Shohi said. He then grabbed Rimi around the waist. “And you, Rimi! Come with me!”

“Your Majesty?!” Rimi cried. She pulled away in surprise at the sudden embrace, causing Shohi to hold her even more forcefully.

“I don’t give a damn about my ‘responsibility’!” Aisha shouted.

“Is that right? I feel bad for Prince Shar and all the people who support you. In fact, I feel bad for the Saisakokuan people in general,” Shohi said.

The emperor then picked Rimi up off the ground.

“What are you doing?!” she cried in a panic.

“Stop squirming!” Shohi snapped. He then turned his attention to the princess. “I’ll be borrowing Rimi. You don’t need to worry, Director Hakurei will be escorting you back to the Palace of the Water Spirit. Rimi will be returned soon.”

With Rimi in his arms, Shohi turned and pushed past Hakurei.

“Keep your nose out of my business,” the emperor spat at the eunuch, who offered a deep bow. Shohi then stormed out of the Palace of Northern Peaks.

Aisha glared at Shohi as he left, while the four consorts looked lost and miserable.

What do I do now? His Majesty said such awful things to Princess Aisha...

Rimi looked up at the emperor’s beautiful face. He seemed so furious. She had no idea what to say to him. He was apparently angry at Rimi as well, though she didn’t know why.

“U-Umm, Your Majesty, where are we going?” she asked timidly.

“Somewhere private,” he said.

The emperor spotted a gate leading to the western peach garden, which stood opposite the eastern pear garden, and brought Rimi through it to enter the garden. True to its name, peach blossoms were in full bloom. The air was pleasantly cool as the thick foliage blocked much of the sun. Hardy begonias

blossomed amid the shade of the trees, their heavy blooms drooping as if the flowers were bowing in shame.

Shohi set Rimi down alongside the begonias and placed his arms against the wall on either side of her, pinning the consort in place. Her eyes were wide as she wondered what he was about to do to her.

“What do you think you’re doing?” he asked, unable to keep the irritation out of his voice.

Rimi wasn’t sure what he was asking, but he did seem to be trying to check his anger.

“Why would you bring Aisha to the rear palace and introduce her to the four consorts?” he elaborated. “Do you not understand that she’s threatening your position as empress?”

“I do realize that,” Rimi responded.

Shohi stared incredulously at her.

“Then why?! Why would you willingly bring her here?!” he demanded, his anger growing.

Rimi flinched. She understood now what she’d done to upset him, but her confidence that she’d done the right thing let her endure his anger.

“I thought it would be fun for us all to have tea together. And I think I was right, Princess Aisha did have fun. Besides—”

“Besides what?! Let me guess, you’re just like Hakurei, trying to play matchmaker between us?!”

Rimi guessed Shohi was so irritated because he felt like people were trying to push the idea of marriage on him everywhere he went. From the way Hakurei had looked before, he had probably arranged things to do just that.

“I hadn’t planned that far ahead. It’s not like I expected you to be there. But now that you bring it up, yes, I do think it would be best if you and she were closer. It clearly backfired, but...”

“You’d really be fine with that?” Shohi asked.

“If that’s what you want from me, then yes. Joining hands with Saisakoku and having Princess Aisha join the rear palace as a sign of that bond is the best-case scenario. I think you know that as well as I do,” Rimi said.

“How can you say that?!” he cried.

Shohi threw himself against Rimi, burying his face in her shoulder.

“I know you consider me your master. I know you aren’t in love with me either. I even understand that you don’t really *want* to be empress,” he lamented. “But I want you. I want to have you by my side. That’s why I asked you. Don’t you understand that?! I want you to stay with me!”

Rimi had been wrong. She’d thought Shohi was angry, but she could now hear the frightened tremble in his voice. He was scared. Scared she would leave him. He sounded more like a child terrified of losing his home and beloved mother rather than a man passionately declaring his love. Rimi’s heart ached for him.

I don’t care who you marry or if I become empress. I’m not going to change, Your Majesty. There’s nothing to be scared of.

Rimi had heard about Shohi’s mother, Noble Consort En, from the emperor himself. He had never loved her as a mother and had even felt relieved by her death. After all, she had never shown him love as a child.

He had never received a mother’s love. Perhaps he was still looking for it.

Rimi was frightened, anxious, and sad over the idea of losing her position. But it seemed Shohi felt the same, believing their relationship would change.

“I know, Your Majesty. You’ve reassured me that I’ll be able to stay in Konkoku. And I know that...that you are not the kind of man who would heartlessly cast me aside.”

It was exactly why Shusei was now Rimi’s enemy. That’s what he’d said. His words had given her the courage to realize that fact.

Rimi softly embraced Shohi’s head, trying not to startle him.



“So no matter where I might end up, I will support you. Please don’t worry. Whether or not I am the empress, whether or not I can stay beside you, I’ll keep supporting you,” Rimi said as she softly stroked his hair. “Is that why you said those awful things to Princess Aisha? Because you were worried?”

Shohi shook his head softly.

“I didn’t mean to say all of that. I’d just wanted to throw out a couple of barbs and leave it at that. But when I heard how irresponsible she was being, I got so angry. It felt like I was looking at the old me. I was so selfish and didn’t care about anything.”

Rimi couldn’t stifle a giggle. Shohi looked up with a frown.

“What? What’s so funny?” he asked.

“You and Princess Aisha are just so adorable,” Rimi said with a sweet smile.

The emperor turned bright red. Suddenly seeming to realize that he was clinging to Rimi, he quickly released her.

“That was inappropriate. I’m sorry,” Shohi said as he straightened up. He seemed to be trying to put on a dignified display, but it was a little too late for that.

“You said so yourself that a day might come when Princess Aisha joins the rear palace. I don’t know if it will be a month or ten years from now. If our relationship with Saisakoku becomes strained, it may never happen. But until things are certain, nothing changes between us. I still want you.”

His embarrassed assurances were enough for Rimi. Her smile deepened.



Aisha couldn’t contain her irritation as she rode the bouncing carriage back to the Palace of the Water Spirit. Was she angry because that stupid, beautiful emperor had called her a shrew? No, it wasn’t like words bothered her. The handmaids in Saisakoku had called her far worse.

I’m upset because he brought up Uncle.

The prince had likely been ordered to get her to dance at the Festival of Fulfillment so she would win the favor of Konkoku’s emperor.

But Aisha's dance was her only form of freedom. Protecting that allowed the princess to hold her chin up high. She'd vowed that she wouldn't be turned into a spectacle. The one worry she couldn't shake was that her kind, understanding uncle would be the one who suffered for it.

Shar was the only member of the royal family who understood the princess. Unlike the others, he never degraded her. In fact, he seemed to find her stubborn, energetic nature amusing.

Aisha knew she was causing trouble for him. Even so, she couldn't give up her freedom. She felt bad about it, but she had to hold firm.

Uncle will be punished. I've known that from the beginning. Still, I'm the one making the decision not to dance. I should be the one to suffer, not Uncle.

But when news eventually reached her father, she'd likely only receive a warning, while her uncle might be subjected to a light lashing.

Shohi's mention of "responsibility" rang painfully in Aisha's mind.

It wasn't just him either. Shuri had been going on about responsibility as well. It was such an annoying word. The princess shook her head roughly, trying to drive the word out of her mind.

Aisha didn't care a bit about responsibility. She felt like it would suffocate her. She'd suffered the sneers of the imperial court for as long as she could remember. She didn't feel any obligation toward a place like that. "Responsibility" was just a shackle.

The princess wanted to be free. It was her lifelong wish, but it would never be granted. Dancing was the one thing that she could do in whatever way she wanted. When she danced, she could forget everything. All the hatred Aisha and her mother had been subjected to, both whispered and shouted, fled from her mind when she danced.

Aisha wanted to protect that at all costs.

It always lingered in her mind, but when people tried to push responsibility on her, she flew her desire like a flag.

Even if she was moved around like a pawn, even if she was married off to

someone, her beloved dance would set her free. Shohi had called it cheap. Maybe it seemed paltry to someone who had tasted real freedom.

The thought irritated Aisha. She wanted more freedom. And she didn't want dance to be just a stubborn form of liberation. She wanted to be truly free. Then she would be able to fully throw herself into dancing, enjoying it simply for pleasure.

Aisha looked up at the summer sky through the carriage window. If only she could turn into a bird and fly out the window. She could fly off and find a place where she was just simply Aisha, where nobody cared about the color of her skin, where she could—

"How are you doing, Princess?" Director Sai Hakurei said from across the carriage.

The man was riding with Aisha in Rimi's place. At first, the princess had been shocked at the idea of riding with a man, but then she'd been informed that he was a eunuch. Apparently, such people were highly valued in Konkoku, where they could work with consorts without any "issues" arising.

Shohi was beautiful, but this man was stunning. He had a captivating aura around him that was more alluring than some women she knew. As Aisha looked at his golden-brown eyes and pale skin, she tilted her head curiously.

"Do you have northwestern blood?" she asked.

"I've been told my mother was a quarter northwestern," he responded.

"Director is an important position, right? The rear palace must not be very fussy about that sort of thing."

"There are some fools who look down on the people of our vassal states, but most Konkokuans are tolerant," Hakurei said with a smile. "There's a bit of a custom in the court. Even if you aren't Konkokuan, as long as you comport yourself as one, you'll be treated as such. Rimi is the same. She took a Konkokuan name and now lives as a Konkokuan. Ours is a large empire, and we have many neighbors. People come here from all over. Saisakoku of course, the Southern Trinity, Wakoku, but many people come from the northwestern lands as well. It would be too much to try and keep track of everyone, whether you're

a bureaucrat or a commoner. Many commoners do the same, actually. They take Konkokuan names and become Konkokuans.”

“Just by changing their name? You’re a lot more tolerant and free than Saisakoku. What a nice country.”

“You’re right. But it makes it much harder to govern.”

Aisha gave an uninterested huff and turned her attention back out the window.



Mars, in his typical grinning mask, had just appeared in Shusei’s chambers. He slightly smiled from beneath his mask as he approached the scholar’s desk.

“And here I was wondering what you were up to. Cuisinology? How curious,” Mars said.

Most of Shusei’s culinology research had been left behind in the palace. All he had on hand were scribbles and notes, which he was working on compiling into a more readable format.

Shusei pushed the paper he was working on out of the way.

“Qi’s brought too many foreign eyes. Our only choice is to lay low and appear loyal to the emperor. If we can’t do anything anyway, what’s the harm in indulging in hobbies?” he asked.

“Oh, but there *are* other things that you can do. Shouldn’t you be working on winning Shar’s favor and making him realize your superiority? If you have the time to write, why not spend it at the Palace of the Water Spirit?” Mars suggested.

The man’s smooth, unsettling mask made it seem as though he was grinning at Shusei. The eyes behind the mask glinted with an amused light.

“Your advice is greatly appreciated, but it wouldn’t be wise to follow Shar around unthinkingly. He’s trying to determine who has the stronger hand, the emperor or the Ho House. Looking desperate will just put us in a weaker position. He’s cutthroat,” Shusei explained.

“He certainly doesn’t seem like it from the way he parties with his servants.”

Shusei frowned slightly at the comment.

Mars would've had to be close to Shar to see that. Does that mean he has access to the Palace of the Water Spirit?

The masked man had apparently been working with the Ho House for years to try and put a Ho on the throne, but Shusei had no idea who he really was. His grandfather, Neison, had met Mars through an acquaintance who claimed the schemer wanted to lend his power to the Ho House, but Neison had never learned his name or seen his face either. The man who had introduced the two of them had also passed away, so the only person left who knew his true identity was Mars himself. And he stubbornly refused to reveal it.

Still, Mars could get fast, accurate information within the court despite the fact that it rarely leaked. Shusei could hardly cut him loose just because he was suspicious.

All I can do is hope that whoever he is and whatever he wants don't end up causing me trouble.

Shusei adopted an outward smile.

"I will take your advice and find a way to win Shar over. On another note, I wanted to talk about the candidacy for Minister of Personnel. There's someone I'd like for the role. I was wondering if you could quietly create support for them?" he asked.

Mars's eyes flicked back and forth beneath his mask as he scrutinized Shusei.

"Oh? And what makes you want to support them?" Mars asked.

"I believe we could encourage him to join our camp. I also believe the emperor's camp would view it as a decent compromise," Shusei said. "After all, they have deep ties to Shu Kojin and Ho Seishu."

Chapter 5: After Her!

I

Rimi arrived at the Palace of the Water Spirit a little over an hour after Aisha and Hakurei. She'd managed to catch one of Shar's servant boys, who said the princess had gone straight to her chambers. So, Rimi had gone there to find her. Apparently, Aisha had ordered the servants to stay out of her room for a while, so they were forced to keep watch from the walkway outside.

"She hasn't come back out since," one of the servant boys said.

What His Majesty said must have really gotten to her.

Shohi had been right, of course. Aisha had responsibilities as a princess. From a certain perspective, she probably seemed irresponsible.

But she's still maturing. Besides, the court hasn't been kind to her. She doesn't feel like she belongs anywhere.

Trying to push the idea of responsibility on her right now wouldn't make it stick. Aisha needed to have a firm idea of where she belonged before she'd be able to see that she had a duty to fulfill. With the way things were, it wasn't really surprising that the princess didn't care about the idea of duty.

Still, sooner or later, she'd have to come to terms with it. It was part of being a royal.

Rimi stepped inside Aisha's chambers. The door leading to the bedroom was closed.

"Princess Aisha?" she called out. Perhaps the princess was sleeping because there was no response.

She could make herself sick if she stays cooped up in a hot room.

Rimi, hoping to get some air circulating, carefully opened the door to avoid disturbing Aisha's sleep. The bright summer sun was streaming through the

window, illuminating the nearby bed. The bed was, however, quite empty.

“Princess Aisha?!” Rimi cried out.

She swept her eyes across the entire room, but Aisha was nowhere to be found. However, the door to her wardrobe hung open, and the contents were strewn across the floor. A chair near the window had been knocked over, and a candle that normally sat beside the bed had been knocked to the floor.

“What happened here? Was there a struggle?” Rimi wondered. Her blood ran cold, and she darted from the room.

“Prince Shar!” Rimi shouted as she barged into his chambers. She didn’t bother getting someone to announce her.

Shar was surrounded by servants and appeared to be in the middle of a card game while Shuri brewed tea.

“My my, what’s got you in such a panic?” Shar said with a kind smile.

“Princess Aisha is gone!” Rimi cried, skipping the usual formalities.

“Gone? Gone where?” Shar said with a confused look.

“When she got back from the rear palace, she said she was going to rest in her room. The people standing watch said she never left, but she’s not there! And it looks like there was a fight!”

The Saisakokuans flew into a panic. Shar’s characteristic smile vanished. He looked at the others in the room with a serious expression.

“You heard her. Everyone, search the palace!” he ordered.

The servants in the room all shouted their acknowledgment and scattered.

“I’m worried about the state of her room. I’m going to send a message to His Majesty and have the ministers come. Let us help you search!” Rimi said.

“I appreciate it,” Shar said, concern clear in his eyes.

Rimi wrote a message and gave it to a soldier on horseback for him to deliver it to the imperial palace. Fear steadily built inside her as she watched him ride off. The scene in Aisha’s room hadn’t looked right. It was like someone had dragged her out of there.

Where are you, Princess Aisha?!

It was less than an hour before Keiyu and Rihan arrived, and Shohi and Jotetsu were not far behind them. Kojin would ordinarily be there too, but a friendly relationship had developed with one of the northwestern kingdoms, so the chancellor was in the middle of negotiating diplomatic terms with them.

Rimi guided the group to Shar's chambers. The prince was sitting in his usual leisurely way. He seemed calm now, at least outwardly. Shuri was a different story. He was looking at his master with a concerned expression, betraying the fact that the prince likely wasn't calm at all.

"We've searched the Palace of the Water Spirit, but we couldn't find her anywhere," Shar said softly. Worry flickered in his eyes.

If someone had made off with the princess, part of the blame would land on Konkoku's shoulders for their lack of security. And if anything untoward ended up befalling the princess, it would spell the end of the budding friendship and likely create an indelible stain on the relationship between their lands.

"We've brought a number of military officers and their troops. Please, allow us to sweep the palace. I'm sorry about this, Prince Shar. I just hope you'll give us some time," Shohi said earnestly.

"I'll wait. This is your land, after all. We're strangers here, and your ways are unfamiliar. All I can do is leave things in your hands," Shar said, looking away and nodding slightly.

Suddenly, Kunki barged in and kneeled.

"Excuse my intrusion, but we haven't been able to find the princess anywhere," he explained. "However, we searched the Cave of the Water Spirit and found warm candle wax on the stone floor. We believe someone may have been waiting there until just recently. We also found this while we were there."

Kunki pulled something out and raised it for them to see. It was a slender, golden chain.

"That's Aisha's," Shar said, creasing his brows.

"Our current belief is that someone infiltrated the palace and has kidnapped

the princess,” Kunki announced and then anxiously clenched his jaw.

“Are you kidding me?” Jotetsu chimed in. “This place is the emperor’s summer home. We’ve got high walls surrounding this whole area for his protection. There are only two points of entry, the front and rear gate, and security’s tight on both ends. I don’t see someone carrying the princess out of this place. Are we really sure she’s not here?”

“All of that is true, but the fact remains that we can’t find her anywhere,” Kunki said.

Keiyu approached Shohi’s side and leaned over.

“If they were able to evade the guards...could the Ho House be behind this? Or rather, Shusei?” the minister whispered.

Rimi couldn’t help but overhear, and the idea shocked her.

Master Shusei? No! He wouldn’t!

Shar wearily shook his head in dismay. Shohi watched silently, and it seemed as if he was thinking carefully about things. Suddenly, he looked up.

“Prince Shar, can I see the princess’s room? It shouldn’t take long,” the emperor said.

“I don’t mind, but why?” Shar asked.

“Something just occurred to me that I’d like to check.”

Rimi led Shohi to Aisha’s chambers. Jotetsu, Rihan, and Keiyu unsurprisingly followed.

The fear continued to bubble inside Rimi when she looked at the dreadful state of the room once more.

I hope she’s okay.

“The only ones who would benefit from kidnapping Princess Aisha are the Ho House. If this ends up poisoning our negotiations, well... Anticipation is high, and the disappointment will be even higher. His Majesty will be the one to suffer for it,” Keiyu said, frowning deeply.

“No, that’s not the case here. If Shusei plans to sit on the throne someday,

he'd be a fool to throw away a relationship with Saisakoku. And Shusei's no fool," Shohi said.

"You don't think you're giving him too much credit?" Rihan said with a scowl. "Something's been off about his thinking ever since he joined the Ho House."

"You don't know him like I do. Shusei's been by my side since I was little. I know how he works," the emperor said. "Rimi, you know your way around Aisha's things at this point, don't you? See if anything's missing. Something might be missing from your room too. Make sure you check."

"Y-Yes, Your Majesty," Rimi said.

She didn't understand what the emperor was getting at, but he clearly had a theory. She tried to keep her hands from shaking as she went through the princess's chests, drawers, and jewelry boxes.

Rimi then went to her own room to see if anything was missing. She still didn't know what kind of answer Shohi was looking for when she returned to him with the news.

"All of Princess Aisha's jewelry is missing, and her traveling shoes are gone. I seem to be missing a ruqun as well," Rimi reported.

Shohi nodded, and sudden looks of realization appeared on Rihan and Keiyu's faces.

"You're joking. She didn't," Jotetsu groaned.

Everyone seemed to have realized something but Rimi.

"She didn't what?!" she asked in a panic.

"She wasn't taken. She left. Or, more accurately, she ran away," Keiyu said, shaking his head.

"What?! But then why is her room such a wreck?!" Rimi cried.

"It certainly looks like a struggle took place. But then again, it also looks like someone just packed in a hurry," Rihan said.

When he put it like that, Rimi could see it. She could have dug what she wanted out of the cupboards. Aisha may have knocked the candle over when

she went to get her traveling shoes beneath the bed. She also might have used the chair to help climb out the window and then knocked it over in the process.

“Kunki said someone had been in the Cave of the Water Spirit. Perhaps Aisha packed her things and hid there. She’d just have to wait for word to spread of her disappearance. After that, it would be chaos. With the guards in a panic, she could find a chance to slip out. She’s a miserable fool, but for a fool, she’s apparently a cunning escape artist. What an unpleasant girl,” Shohi grumbled.

Jotetsu whistled in admiration.

“How the hell did you guess she’d run away?” he asked.

“Because I upset her. And after seeing the sorts of ridiculous games she gets up to, I just had a feeling,” Shohi said.

“But that’s an even worse scenario,” Keiyu said. “If someone had carried her off, at least they’d be protecting her in a way. If she’s by herself, there’s nobody to make sure she’s safe.”

Shohi’s face went pale.

“Keiyu! Rihan! I don’t care how many men it takes: find Aisha! Jotetsu, you do what you do best,” Shohi ordered.

Keiyu, Rihan, and Jotetsu all acknowledged their orders. Just as they were about to leave to begin their search, Rimi interrupted them.

“Let me help! I’ve spent a lot of time with Princess Aisha now. I might be able to pick up on something that could tell us where she went!”

“Then you’re with me. You fine with that, Your Majesty?” Jotetsu asked.

Shohi gave a tense nod.

“She’s in your hands. But remember, if we don’t find the princess as soon as possible, our future with Saisakoku will vanish into thin air.”

It didn’t matter if Aisha had left on her own. Her well-being was supposed to be Konkoku’s responsibility. They would bear the fault for not stopping her.

Rimi bowed to Shohi and then hurried off to the stable with Jotetsu.

We have to find her, and soon.

She could barely contain her nerves. They needed to do this for Konkoku, for *Shohi*, but Rimi was worried about Aisha's fate as well.

"Mother and I have no place there."

Aisha was usually so cheerful, but she'd been so serious in that moment.

"It feels like we're constantly being told to get out. If they hate us that much, they should just let us leave. But they won't."

Rimi knew exactly how bitter and painful it was to have nowhere you "fit." Her father had let her live in the palace out of pity. She'd been far too young and fearful to even think of running away.

But Aisha was fourteen. If she were a little younger, she might have just accepted her fate. If she were a little older, she might have carried herself with more common sense. It seemed like they had landed in this situation because she was not only immature but also clever and driven.

Please be okay, Princess.

Rimi silently prayed as she followed Jotetsu from the Palace of the Water Spirit.

II

"You wanna dance for a livin'? Only place I can think of is a brothel, hon," the kindly farm wife answered as she bounced the crying baby that she was carrying on her back.

Aisha clapped her hands together eagerly!

"Of course! I've heard of those! Thank you so much," she said.

The farm wife looked worried as Aisha waved and turned to leave.

"Now hold on there! If you're looking for work, you ain't gotta jump right to workin' in a brothel! A cute thing like you could be working in a mansion somewhere. You gotta be takin' care of yourself, you hear?"

"Thank you, I appreciate it," Aisha replied brightly as she turned away from

the farmhouse.

The princess was dressed like a young common boy in a cotton overshirt and slim-legged pants. Her hair looked similarly plain, having been pulled back in a rough bun. Yet despite her simple appearance, the princess's cheerful, gorgeous face was more than enough to draw stares.

The road from the Palace of the Water Spirit was wide enough for carriages to pass. A river flowed lazily along one side of the road while thickets of trees lined the other. Houses dotted the area beyond the trees where people farmed the land.

Cicadas wailed from the trees. The dazzling sun pierced their leafy canopies. Aisha had only been on the road for a short while, but sweat had already begun to roll down her back and dust clung to her cheeks.

Yet the princess's mood couldn't have been brighter.

Aisha had gone to Rimi's room before making her escape where she changed to make herself look like a Konkokuan handmaid. However, her appearance would've drawn too much attention in the city, so she'd made her way to a nearby farmhouse.

"My old employer was a cruel man, so I decided to escape. I'm headed to Annei to look for new work," Aisha had claimed. *"But I'm worried these clothes will make it easy for my master to find me. Could I trade you these for something a little more sensible?"*

The silk outfit she'd worn would fetch a good price, so the farm wife had given her two pieces of clothing in return. The woman had seemed kind, so Aisha had asked if she knew of a place where she could dance to make money. She'd mentioned a "brothel," which had rung a bell. Aisha's Konkokuan teacher had told her it was a sort of inn where customers were given food and drink while being entertained.

I'm sorry, Uncle. I know you're worried, but this is the best way to make sure I don't cause any more trouble for you.

The princess had always known she'd end up being used as a political tool. The moment Aisha had been ordered to accompany Shar to Konkoku, a plan

had formed in her mind. Those political wheels had clearly begun to turn, and if she was going to escape, this was her last chance.

And escape had been all the princess had ever wanted.

When Aisha was young, she had once actually managed to slip out and attempted to stow away on Shar's ship during one of his trips to the Southern Trinity. But just as escape was in sight, she had been caught and brought back home.

After that, she was constantly kept under strict supervision. Another opportunity to escape had never presented itself. Even if she did manage to pull it off, who knew what terrible punishment her attendants would receive.

But the trip to Konkoku was the perfect chance to escape their strict supervision.

Of course, if she ran off while they were traveling, her uncle would end up taking the blame. She'd decided she would wait until they were guests of Konkoku. Then responsibility would fall on them and not her uncle. It would ruin the relationship between their lands, but that wasn't any of Aisha's business.

The princess had begged to go sightseeing to get a feel for the city. She'd slipped out of her escort's sight and sold a ring to a jeweler, obtaining some Konkokuan money in the process.

Aisha had been a bit worried that her court upbringing would leave her unable to find her way in Konkoku. Still, her Konkokuan was flawless, and Hakurei had been right. There were Saisakokuans and northwesterners in all directions, dressed like Konkokuans. It seemed if one acted like a Konkokuan, they were accepted as one.

However, despite all her careful planning, Aisha hadn't had enough courage to go through with it. Not until Shohi had said the things he'd said had her anger and frustration managed to make up the difference.

"It's okay, I'll survive," Aisha said to herself. She then looked up at the crimson sky and smiled.

I'm free. Who knew freedom could feel this good?

No matter where she might end up, each step she took would be one she'd decided for herself.



Shusei was making his way from the Eastern District to the Western District. He had people to see and groundwork to lay. With so much focus on diplomacy during Qi, domestic affairs tended to stall during the month. But that was exactly why it was the perfect time to prepare for the future.

When Qi ended and the focus turned back inward, his actions would bear fruit.

The election of the Minister of Personnel will speed up once Qi is over. Someone will likely be chosen shortly after that.

A new minister meant a shift in power. It all depended on whether he backed the emperor or the Ho House. The ministries of Revenue, Rites, and Works were all firmly on the emperor's side, while the ministries of War and Justice stood with the Ho House. The emperor's side currently had the upper hand, and depending on who was chosen, the new Minister of Personnel could solidify their advantage.

I know who Chancellor Shu will see as a compromise, but the Ho House will see him as an ally. I just need to make sure the other officials are focused on the potential minister.

Shusei felt as if there was only one suitable choice. The person hadn't been mentioned as a candidate yet, but when they were, people would wonder why they'd never considered it before.

His unique situation is exactly why nobody has nominated him, but I can't think of anyone better suited.

Just as Shusei had stepped into the shade beneath one of the Eastern District building's eaves, he heard someone shouting his name in a panic. Shusei turned to see his grandfather, Ho Neison, racing toward him, beads of sweat rolling down the man's face.

Neison was retired from official duty. There shouldn't have been anything bringing him to the imperial palace. Shusei was suspicious of his grandfather's

presence there, but he waited for him.

“Grandfather? What’s the matter?”

“Shusei! Please don’t tell me you did this!” Neison shouted and shoved a paper in Shusei’s face.

It was an emergency message from Mars.

“The princess from Saisakoku has gone missing. Is the Ho House behind this?”

Dread set in as Shusei read the letter.

“Well?! Did you do this, Shusei?! I don’t care what your plan is, going after a Saisakokuan royal is too far!”

“I’m not that foolish,” Shusei said as he thrust the letter back at Neison. “But this is beyond house squabbles. This is a national issue. If the princess disappeared from the Konkokuan palace, we’ll never dream of opening channels with them again. I need more information.”

Shusei left Neison and rushed to the Palace of the Water Spirit by carriage. He assumed Rihan and Keiyu would already be there—Shohi as well.

We need to understand the situation first. The negotiations with Saisakoku have to succeed.

It didn’t matter who was in power, positive relations with Saisakoku would benefit all of Konkoku.

The heat was intense, so Shusei opened the carriage’s windows to let the breeze in. As he did, he spotted a pair of riders down the road. A man and a woman. Shusei ordered the carriage to stop as he realized who the male rider was.

“Jotetsu!” the scholar shouted, leaning out the carriage window.

It was the emperor’s bodyguard, and Rimi was with him. When she realized Shusei was there, she became guarded.

“Well well, the high lord of the Ho House has business with me? What have I done to deserve such an honor?” Jotetsu said as he pulled up beside the carriage.

This wasn't the time for jokes or trading barbs. Shusei cut straight to the point.

"I'm here because I heard the princess disappeared," he said.

Jotetsu and Rimi's expressions both stiffened.

"We don't have time for games," Shusei urged. "Someone's already informed me. Don't ask who. But if this is really happening, it's serious. You're not going to be able to keep this hidden. So tell me, Jotetsu."

The bodyguard gave a defeated sigh.

"It's true. It seems like Princess Aisha's run off," he said.

"Run off? Why?" Shusei asked.

"Search me. We don't know why exactly, but we're sure she left. Yet it's not like we can go up to Prince Shar and say 'Your princess, your problem.' The ministers of Rites and Revenue are putting together a search around the palace. Rimi and I are trying to come up with ideas for where she might have gone," Jotetsu explained.

"Master Shusei, please! Won't you help us search?" Rimi pleaded. She had been silent so far, but it seemed like she'd managed to pull herself together. "When Master Jotetsu and I disappeared, you were able to find us. I've spent a lot of time with Princess Aisha, and I think I may have picked up a clue during that time. But I don't know what it might be. I don't know where to search or what to search for."

Being in a pitch-dark cave where nobody could see was one thing. However, Shusei wanted to avoid working directly with Rimi if at all possible.

But I can't turn my back on them. If Princess Aisha's run off by herself, then time is of the essence. I can't afford to waste it deliberating.

Shusei opened the carriage door and offered a hand to Rimi.

"All right. His Majesty and I did agree to a truce for the month of Qi. Get in, Rimi. I'll help."

"Thank you!" she said as she climbed into the carriage.

“Jotetsu, you follow on horseback. We’re heading for Annei,” Shusei said.

“Annei? Why?” Jotetsu asked.

“A young girl on her first venture into a foreign country won’t have the courage to head into the countryside. She’ll want to go somewhere lively. Thus, Annei.”



As the carriage raced toward Annei, Rimi explained how Aisha had escaped from the Palace of the Water Spirit. Shusei seemed to sympathize with Rimi’s plight. He gave a big nod when she’d finished speaking.

“I see now. It’s certainly clear that she’s run off. Did she go anywhere during her stay at the palace?” he asked.

“We went to the rear palace today, and yesterday we went sightseeing in Annei. That’s it,” Rimi said.

“Do you remember where you went in Annei?”

“A place near the main street. There were a bunch of fancy teahouses.”

“That sounds like the Eastern-Central District,” Shusei replied. He knocked on the roof of the carriage to alert the driver. “Take us to Eastern-Central.”

“She may have used the time sightseeing to secretly prepare a place to stay. Even if she hasn’t, she’ll likely end up going somewhere familiar when she doesn’t know what to do,” the scholar explained.

“Thank you for helping us,” Rimi said with a slight bow of her head. Shusei shook his head.

“This affects Konkoku’s future. The Ho House’s prospects are at stake here as well. I’m doing my duty as master of my house. That’s all. It’s not for your sake or His Majesty’s.”

It was a good reminder of the position they were in. But in a carriage like this, with their knees so close, they were nearly touching. Shusei seemed to notice the tension and gazed out the window.

“You don’t need to be so worried. I’m not going to touch you,” he said.

Rimi hung her head and chastised herself.

C'mon, Rimi. Keep it together. He's my enemy. Remember that.

Even though Shusei was helping at the moment, once Qi ended, he'd go right back to ruthlessly scheming against Shohi.

His Majesty has to crush his schemes. Master Shusei is going to be thorough.

They were silent for some time after that as the carriage bounced and swayed. Eventually, they entered the city of Annei.

Shusei and Rimi exited the carriage. Jotetsu joined them as they headed for the teahouse that they'd used yesterday to rest. The owner remembered Aisha well but said they hadn't seen her since their visit. The group searched the teahouse to be sure, but there was no sign of the princess.

Then, at Shusei's request, Rimi did her best to recall the streets they'd gone down and the shops Aisha had stopped to look in. Perhaps he thought one of the shopkeepers might remember something. She was able to remember pretty much all of them, so they visited the shops one by one to ask for information.

They all remembered being visited by a beautiful Saisakokuan girl, but her questions had been simple. "Oh, what's this? Is this valuable?" After an hour with no results, the heat and panic were getting to Rimi. But Shusei and Jotetsu were soldiering on despite the sweat pouring from their brows, so Rimi forced herself to carry on.

"Yeah, pretty little Saisakokuan girl, right? Made a fortune off her."

It was maybe the tenth shop they'd visited. A jeweler selling hairpins and bangles finally had information on Aisha. Rimi felt like she was going to jump for joy.

"A fortune how?" Shusei asked calmly.

"She asked me to buy a Saisakokuan ring she was wearing. The thing was ridiculously valuable, and I told her I didn't have nearly enough money on hand to buy it, but she said she'd take what I had," the shopkeeper explained. "Wait, what is this? You two with the government or something? It was her idea, so

don't go telling me I did something wrong."

"No no no!" Rimi cut in, trying to calm the panicking jeweler. "She just asked me to find something for her. I'm her handmaid."

"You are? Well, come to think of it, I do feel like I've seen you before," the shopkeeper said. He'd looked as though he was getting ready to bolt, but he was starting to relax.

"Did she say anything else? Ask anything?" Shusei asked.

"Let's see now..." the shopkeeper said, looking up in thought at the low ceiling of his stall. "Oh, that's right. She asked if a good dancer could find work in Konkoku. I said it was possible, but when she asked me where, well... How could I mention brothels to a little noble girl? Anyway, that was right about when some soldier or something came up, and she went running off."

Rimi, Jotetsu, and Shusei exchanged looks.

"No!" Rimi gasped.

"It's highly likely," Shusei said with a nod. "I will say, it's admirable in a way for her to be willing to work a city job. She's certainly committed to the idea. She's likely asked a number of people the same question. Princess Aisha may be headed for a brothel."

A brothel?!

The panic continued to rise.

III

"The brothels are all in Western-Central. We should head that way too," Shusei said.

"This whole thing is just perfect," Jotetsu said with disgust. "She plans everything out and then does the stupidest thing possible. Honestly, a brothel?"

Shusei paused and then turned to look at the bodyguard.

"Jotetsu, return to the Palace of the Water Spirit. Inform His Majesty and the

ministers that Princess Aisha may be headed for a brothel. Ask that they send soldiers to Western-Central. We'll meet them there. In the meantime, I'll figure out which brothel she's gone to," he ordered.

"Fine by me. I can tell them why we think she's headed that way, but should I mention you?" Jotetsu asked.

"It would just make them suspicious. Tell them you and Rimi figured it out. We aren't going to get any second chances with this. Rimi and I will look for the brothel. Just hurry."

"I'm on it," Jotetsu said and darted into the crowd.

"Sorry about this," Shusei said as he grabbed Rimi's wrist, causing her to jump in surprise while he remained completely calm. "We're in a hurry, but the red-window district is dangerous for women, even during the daytime. I'm going to need to escort you like this."

He pulled Rimi along as he began to head west.

I just hope Princess Aisha is safe.

Since the Western-Central District tended to flourish at night, it was less crowded at the moment than Eastern-Central. As they made their way into the district, the people there were dressed normally. There didn't seem to be much debauchery happening.

About seventy buildings were crammed together. The shorter establishments were only two stories tall, but some reached as high as four. Every pillar, door, and window frame was decorated in lurid colors. Each building had latticed windows on the first floor looking out on the street. Some were square, others round, but the lattices on every one were painted in a vivid red. It was the mark of a brothel, and the citizens apparently often referred to brothels as "red-windows."

"Where do we go now, Master Shusei?" Rimi asked.

Shusei had finally stopped to gaze at the row of buildings, giving Rimi a chance to catch her breath.

"We could try speaking to the brothel owners or patrons, but they'd likely be

too suspicious to tell the truth. There's a madam I know. I'm sure she'll be able to give us something," the scholar said.

"A madam?" Rimi asked.

"An old woman who speaks to guests to find out their interests so she can match them with a girl. Every brothel has its own madam, but they work together to refer clients or keep track of what certain customers like and which girls are working where," he explained.

"You sure seem to know a lot. You aren't a regular, are you?" Rimi asked. She was so surprised by his knowledge of the subject that the question slipped out before she could stop it.

Shusei grimaced.

"I believe I've mentioned before that I've tried to find food with a cuisinological link to libido. I worked with all the madams I could find in the process. That's all. They were the ones who told me about jiasheng. Come on, this way. The madam here has all sorts of connections," the scholar explained.

Shusei led Rimi into an enormous four-story brothel. It had a wide front door draped with a thin cloth. As they passed through the curtain, they were met with a grand, stone-floored hall lined with tables and chairs. It looked like a garishly decorated teahouse. The air was filled with a sickeningly sweet incense that made Rimi's stomach churn. The room was empty at the moment.

The sound of footsteps echoed from a grand staircase near the back of the room as a young girl came racing down. Her eyes went wide as she saw Rimi and Shusei.

"Is Madam Gako in?" Shusei called out.

"Just a moment!" she said and went back up the stairs. Before long, an old woman in a gray shenyi descended.

"Well well!" the madam said as she spotted Shusei. When her eyes landed on Rimi, her smile turned wicked.

The woman approached the pair and bowed.

"The cuisinologist returns! How can I help you today? I see you've brought a

lovely friend. Were you hoping to rent a room?" she asked.

"No, and I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't cause trouble. I'm here because I need information, and I need it quickly. Has a young northwestern girl come to any of the brothels today?" Shusei asked.

"Does word travel that fast? She doesn't work here, but I could make arrangements for you," she said.

"Where does she work, then?!" Rimi asked, pushing past Shusei without thinking.

"The real question is, what do I get out of telling you?" Gako said with a fox-like smile.

Shusei didn't hesitate to pull a handful of coins from his pocket and place them in the old woman's hand.

"Oh dear, I shouldn't accept this. You really don't have to," she said while quickly stuffing the money into her sleeve pocket.

"Tell us where," Shusei said.

"The Spring Peach," Gako said.

"Let's go," Shusei said as he pulled Rimi back outside.

The Spring Peach was three doors down from the brothel they'd started with. It was a smaller building with only three floors. As they rushed inside, they found it was laid out similarly to the other brothel. A woman, looking very much the courtesan, was seated at one of the tables. She was puffing on a long, slender tobacco pipe.

Shusei rushed over to her, pulled out his purse, and placed it beside the woman.

"I realize this is sudden, but I have a request. I'd like to buy you for the next hour," he said.

The woman looked up at the pair of them and snorted.

"Never seen a man bring a woman to hire a woman. If you want my time, you're gonna have to go through the brothel," she said.

“This is more of a private matter. If you help me, you won’t have to worry about the brothel taking its cut. A little extra money would be nice, wouldn’t it?” Shusei suggested.

The courtesan reached for the purse and looked inside. Her expression turned to shock when she realized how much money was there. She seemed torn between excitement to get her hands on such a sum and fear of what she was going to be asked to do.

“And what is it I have to do, honey?”

“Stay with this woman and keep her safe while you wait on Western-Central’s main street for a certain individual. When they come, let her go with them. She’ll know who she’s supposed to go with,” Shusei said.

“Master Shusei? What are you planning?” Rimi asked.

“Jotetsu should be here with others before long. Wait for them and bring them here. I can’t let you stand around alone in the red-window district. You’ll be safer with her,” the scholar explained.

“What are you going to do then?”

“I’m going to search the building and ensure her safety. We need to work fast before anything happens that can’t be undone. If someone needs to be stopped, I can’t expect you to do it. I’m not even confident in myself, but maybe I can buy time.”

“But that sounds dangerous!”

“Stop arguing and go! We don’t have time for this,” Shusei demanded. He then turned to the courtesan. “Drive off anyone who causes trouble for her. You don’t want to find out what will happen if you break your word.”

“Okay, I get it,” the woman said, overwhelmed by the scholar’s urgency.

Shusei released Rimi’s arm and rushed toward the back of the building.

“Master Shusei!” Rimi called out.

She tried chasing after him, but the courtesan grabbed her.

“Now hold on. I’m in charge of you, so don’t go running off,” she said.

“But—”

“I don’t know what he’s doing, but he’s your man, right? A girl’s gotta trust her man.”

That’s right. Master Shusei is doing this for Konkoku.

If Rimi spent all her time worrying about Shusei, she would just be wasting his help. She needed to focus on waiting for Jotetsu and leading him back to the brothel.

If anything were to happen, the relationship between Konkoku and Saisakoku would be shattered. Aisha would also suffer because of it.

Rimi bowed her head to the woman.

“Okay. Let’s go.”



Aisha scanned the room, looking for an opening.

Running for the door wouldn’t work. I wouldn’t be able to make it between the two of them. Even if I dodged one, the other could easily grab me. Not to mention, I’m not even sure how to get the door open.

The princess couldn’t believe her own stupidity.

Upon hearing that she could find work dancing at a brothel, she’d gone looking for them after making it to Annei. She’d found an area packed with brothels and entered the second largest one she could find. Aisha had assumed that the largest one would already be brimming with talented dancers, so she’d aimed for the second largest. She was certain her dancing would be a hit there.

An old woman had been inside. Aisha had mentioned she was a good dancer and was looking for work. At first, the old woman had seemed shocked, but soon an enormous smile bloomed on her face. She’d given the princess tea and snacks and asked her to wait. Then the owner, a middle-aged man, had emerged from the back. Another man was with him; he looked similar enough to be his son.

The pair had been friendly and asked Aisha a lot of questions, like where she’d come from and why she was looking for work. Using the same story she’d

concocted for the farm wife, she insisted that she didn't have any family and was worried that her old master would find her. They'd agreed to hire her.

Aisha had been over the moon, so when they asked her to show them her dance, she'd followed them to the second floor. They'd taken her up some stairs and down a corridor lined with red doors on one side. The princess had glanced at the doors as they passed, moving deeper and deeper into the building until eventually the corridor ended with a wall. A peacock was painted on the wall, which the older man had poked. Part of the wall had opened up, and the man had pulled it aside to reveal a hidden door.

The room had made Aisha nervous. It was a cramped space and didn't have nearly enough room to dance. The only windows in the room were some thin slats that had been cut out high on the wall. It almost seemed like a prison cell. Then there was the large bed sitting in the center of the room.

Sickly-sweet incense filled the air. It smelled like depravity, making Aisha shiver.

I'm in a whorehouse.

The realization had come too late. One of the men had grabbed Aisha by the shoulder, and she had darted inside the room to shake him off. The owner's son had then sealed the door tight behind them.

"This is where we keep the goods that can't be put on display yet. If you're on the run from your master, it's better we keep you here. Can't have anyone come looking for you, right?" the owner had said in a low, amused voice.

The room was hot and humid, but all the princess could feel was the icy grip of fear. She looked desperately for some form of escape. Anything to help her survive the situation.

"What's the matter, sweetheart? You said you wanted a job. Now we've gotta figure out what you're worth. Gotta be able to set a price, right?" the owner said with a grin. Behind him, his son's eyes burned with a hungry light.

No. No no no.

He looked like an animal. Aisha had never seen a man look at her like that. She felt the intense desire to curl up in a ball. But she knew if she did, she'd

never make it out of the room. A single tear rolled from her eye as she tried to keep her body from quaking.

Aisha was afraid, but she was also mortified by her own stupidity.



Shusei raced through the building as he searched for Aisha. But no matter where he looked, he couldn't find her. He was acquainted with the madam of the place, and when he had happened across her, he had been certain she'd be able to help. But when he'd asked if a young girl had come there, her answer had been curt and immediate.

"Don't know. None of my business."

Still, when Shusei had described who he was looking for, he'd picked up on the momentary flicker in the woman's eyes. The madam likely knew something was unusual about Aisha but was too enticed by the opportunity to hire her to care.

Still, I've checked every place I can think of. Could she be outside somewhere?

As Shusei stood and pondered his options, the scholar thought he heard a faint shriek. When he looked up in surprise, he caught sight of a peacock painted on a wall at the far end of the corridor.

Elaborate paintings were a common sight in brothels, but when Shusei approached it and took a close look at the art, it was the peacock's eye that caught his attention. The paint seemed faded and discolored. It looked as if it had been frequently, intentionally touched.

It couldn't be.

Shusei pressed his ear against the wall. He could hear what sounded like a struggle happening on the other side and a young girl screaming.

She's here!

He touched and prodded at the eye, trying to find out how it worked. Before long, part of the wall came dislodged and a handle emerged.

Just as Shusei went to pull the handle, he heard a loud commotion from downstairs.

“Look for her! She should be here!” someone barked.

Shusei knew that voice. It was Shohi’s. The scholar was equal parts shocked and impressed.

His Majesty came here with his soldiers? He must have realized his presence would be a good display of sincerity to Saisakoku. I’m surprised. But if he finds me here, it’ll be trouble.

Shusei looked around quickly.

How do I let His Majesty know that Princess Aisha is inside?

An immense woolen tapestry decorated the wall. Shusei pulled on it as hard as he could, ripping it off the wall and throwing it to the ground. There were candles as well, sitting in hollows within the support pillars. He grabbed a few of them and threw them to the ground.

Multiple sets of footsteps echoed from the stairs.

Rimi and Jotetsu have done their job. The rest is up to you! Please, hurry, Your Majesty!

On the other side of the corridor, a large window sat open. Shusei could see the first floor’s roof extending out and connecting to a gazebo in the garden. It looked possible to reach the ground from there.

The scholar rushed to the window, climbed onto the roof, moved to the gazebo, and then dropped to the ground.

Chaos gripped the first floor of the brothel. Women were clamoring while men were running every which way, eager to escape whatever trouble was unfolding. One man decided to take advantage of the disorder to grab a money box and run. It was pandemonium.

Shusei escaped through the brothel’s rear entrance and passed through an alley to peek out at the main street.

The exterior of the brothel looked just as chaotic as its interior. It was a confused mass of onlookers, people rushing out the brothel’s doors, and the occasional pickpocket from neighboring brothels looking to take advantage of the confusion. Soldiers stood guard, trying desperately to keep curious

onlookers from slipping inside The Spring Peach.

Shusei looked for a way to slip by without being spotted by the guards. As he did, he caught sight of Rimi standing in front of a brothel across the street with a dismayed look on her face.

No, Rimi! Not there!

Now wasn't the time to worry about being seen. Shusei rushed out of the alley and pushed his way through the crowd.

"Rimi!" he screamed. He pushed his voice as loud as he could, unsure if she'd hear him through the din. "Get away from there! Get over to the guards! Hurry!"

Chapter 6: What is the Taste of Freedom?

I

Rimi couldn't stop fidgeting as she waited with the courtesan, watching the road. Suddenly, she noticed a cloud of dust down the street. It grew and spread, and before Rimi realized it, it was bearing down on her.

At the center of the storm of dust was a unit of cavalymen at full gallop. There must have been fifty of them. At the lead was Shohi on a steel gray horse, escorted by Jotetsu and Kunki.

"Your Majesty!" Rimi called out.

The courtesan looked at Rimi with confusion, which quickly turned to fear as she began to back toward a nearby alley.

"You didn't just say... Who are you, exactly?" she asked.

"Please, come with me. I want to thank you," Rimi said.

"Oh, no no no. Keep me out of this. Your money's enough. So long!" the woman said as she sprinted down the alley.

Rimi wanted to try and bring her back so she could thank her properly, but there wasn't enough time. The best she could do was to offer a few silent words of thanks as she rushed over to the horsemen.

Jotetsu and Shohi were the first to notice Rimi. They pulled their reins, bringing their horses to a halt.

"Princess Aisha is in The Spring Peach! Please, hurry!" she shouted.

"Good work, Rimi! You wait here. Come on, men!" the emperor commanded before spurring his horse.

Rimi chased after the cavalry through the cloud of choking dust as they rode away. By the time she'd made it over to The Spring Peach, Shohi and Jotetsu had already dismounted and entered it with a group of soldiers. The area was in

complete chaos, as if someone had set off a bomb in the middle of a festival. Shrieking could be heard echoing from within the building. Outside, soldiers tried to contain the chaos.

Intimidated by the commotion and worried about getting knocked down in the scuffle, Rimi stood on the other side of the road in front of another brothel. She looked up at The Spring Peach and prayed for Aisha's safety.

Suddenly, she thought that she heard a voice calling her name.

Was that Master Shusei?

Rimi stretched to get a better look at the crowd when someone from within the brothel behind her reached out and grabbed her around the neck. Before she could cry out, another hand clamped over her mouth. She wasn't even able to comprehend the situation before being dragged inside the other brothel.



"Look for her! She should be here!" Shohi ordered as he hoisted his sword in the air. His jaw was so tight with panic and worry that he spoke through gritted teeth.

I knew you were stupid, but a brothel?!

Keiyu and Rihan's search team had confirmed that a girl matching Aisha's appearance had shown up at a farmhouse near the Palace of the Water Spirit, but they hadn't known where to go from there. A careful, thorough search would've been reliable but time-consuming.

Shar had been so anxious that he couldn't even speak, and Shohi had grown increasingly irritated as he waited with the prince. When Jotetsu had rushed in and announced Aisha was likely in an Annei brothel, the emperor had grabbed his sword and rallied the men before riding with his bodyguard for the city.

It was a meaningful gesture, having the emperor himself go after the princess. It stressed that the Konkokuans would take every measure to rescue her.

Prostitutes ran shrieking from the room as they barged into the brothel. Shohi, Jotetsu, and a handful of soldiers ascended the stairs to the second floor. The far end of the hall was in utter shambles, as if some great struggle had taken place. When the emperor raced over to get a better look, he noticed a

strange handle jutting from the wall.

Shohi thought that he could hear a voice. When he placed his ear to the wall, his suspicions were confirmed after hearing someone with a high voice crying out from within. There had to be a room on the other side of the wall. And it seemed to have been constructed with thick walls to block any sound.

The emperor grabbed the handle, causing the wall to slide to the side, and the muffled cries became screams.

A dimly lit room sat on the other side with a large bed in the center. Aisha, dressed like a shabby common boy, sat atop the bed, huddled and trembling. A man was standing alongside the bed while another older one had the princess cornered. He was reaching for her, trying to touch her. It was clear what the man was after, and the crude, repulsive sight instantly filled Shohi with burning rage.

“Jotetsu!” Shohi shouted as he rushed into the room and brought his blade to the throat of the man menacing Aisha.

“Don’t move, cur.”



Rimi found herself dragged into some kind of bar that looked very similar to The Spring Peach. The man who’d grabbed her threw her to the floor, but she quickly sat up and collected herself.

She’d never seen the man before, but from the way he was dressed, he seemed to be an employee. He stank like booze and his eyes were unfocused.

“Now what do we have here? A palace woman in a place like this?” he said.

There was something dark and threatening in the man’s eyes that made Rimi freeze with fear. She began to tremble.

Wherever chaos went, whether it was at the scene of a fire or a battlefield, thieves, kidnappers, and violence came with it. In other parts of the city, commotion like this wasn’t that dangerous. But the red-window district was a different story. Ethics were looser here, the atmosphere was corrupt, and the district brimmed with people prone to act rashly.

The man stalked toward Rimi. She steadied her trembling legs, sprang to her feet, and tried to run. But the man grabbed her by the shoulder, and she cried out as he hurled her to the ground again. Rimi curled her hands into fists and tried to hit him with both hands as he loomed over her, but he seized her by the wrists.

He began to tug at Rimi's ruqun.

"Somebody!" she shrieked, voice hoarse with fear.

"I'm gonna enjoy this," the man said as he leaned over her, leering at Rimi with a toothy smile.

Just then, he grunted as someone grabbed his collar from behind. It was the man's turn to tumble to the floor as he was yanked off Rimi and thrown to the ground. She looked up and saw a very familiar back standing between her and her attacker.

Master Shusei!

The brothel employee staggered to his feet, but Shusei grabbed him by the collar and slammed his fist into the bridge of the man's nose. The man's cry of pain did nothing to prevent Shusei from hammering his nose again.

Rimi was shaking too hard to move. She couldn't even speak. But the look on Shusei's face made tears start to overflow. His teeth were clenched and his eyes were flaming with anger. She'd never seen him like that before.



“Please, stop!” the man cried, but Shusei slugged him in the gut, turning the brute into a moaning heap.

“Get out of my sight,” Shusei said coolly as he straightened himself up. “In any other situation, you wouldn’t be leaving. Go, before I change my mind.”

The man whimpered and held his stomach as he slowly got to his feet.

“Out!” Shusei roared.

Rimi’s attacker straightened up like he’d been whipped and scrambled out the door. Once Shusei was sure the man was gone, he turned to face her.

“Get up, please. Go have the soldiers protect you,” the scholar said.

Rimi was curled in a ball and paralyzed with fear. The most she could manage was barely raising a trembling hand. Shusei reached out and held it tightly.

His hand was so big and warm, and he squeezed hers reassuringly. Finally, she managed to find her voice.

“Thank you. I’m sorry, I was stupid...” she said.

Rimi’s legs were still weak as she rose to her feet. Still, with Shusei’s warm, calming grip, she was finally able to get her shaking under control.

I can’t believe Master Shusei hit him. And for me...

She was relieved to be saved from such a precarious situation, but it had also been shocking to see the scholar beat a man without hesitation.

“Can you walk?” he asked, seeing Rimi’s fear beginning to dwindle. She nodded.

Shusei guided her outside and surveyed the mayhem.

“I see Kunki over there. Get over to him,” he said, pointing out the bodyguard and releasing her hand.

“Master Shusei...” Rimi began, but she wasn’t sure what she wanted to say. An apology? A thank you? An admission that she wanted to stay with him?

“Go,” he ordered her with a stern look. “I’ll make sure you make it to Kunki. Remember, we’re enemies. I don’t plan on helping you anymore, so stop

making trouble for me.”

He’s right. And I made him attack someone.

That fact, more than Shusei’s cold words, stabbed at Rimi’s heart.

“Now go. You’ve got a job to do. Princess Aisha will need someone to care for and console her once she’s rescued.”

“Right. I’m sorry. I’ll go,” Rimi said.

She left Shusei and made her way across the street to Kunki. It took self-encouragement and sheer willpower to keep her legs from collapsing out of fear as she walked.



The man went white and tumbled off the bed, landing on his behind. Shohi was after him instantly, bringing the tip of his blade between the man’s eyes.

“I believe I told you not to move,” the emperor said.

Jotetsu had pounced into the room with Shohi, moving in a low crouch to surprise the other man. A single foot sweep sent his foe toppling to the ground. He struggled, but Jotetsu’s foot on his back and the cold tip of a blade against his spine were enough to silence him.

“Just give me the order, Your Majesty,” he said with a hungry grin.

“Your Majesty?” Aisha’s attackers mumbled in unison. The embers of fear in their eyes burned brighter.

“I can only assume that men who lock young girls in dubious rooms are not running an upstanding business,” Shohi said. “We need to show how serious we’re taking this crime. Their heads will be pickled in brine and presented to Saisakoku as a gift. Take them away, Jotetsu,”

The men wailed in fear as soldiers rushed in and bound them with ropes. They begged desperately for their lives as Jotetsu led them away.

Aisha looked up defiantly at Shohi, as if she was annoyed he’d gone out of his way for her. But her body trembled violently, and the princess couldn’t stop tears from escaping. The show of strength made the emperor’s heart ache.

She must be terrified.

“Are you hurt?” he asked.

“I’m not coming back,” she responded in a quivering voice.

Shohi was appalled. How could she still say that in a situation like this?

“Even after seeing the terror that awaits you out here?” he asked.

“I don’t care if it’s scary. I don’t care if I’m defiled or hurt. I’m free,” she said.

“You really love the idea of freedom that much?” Shohi replied.

His cold response was the last straw. All of the emotion and tension of the situation burst out of Aisha.

“I have spent my entire life hated for being northwestern and locked up in a palace where I’m sneered at and told I don’t belong! I don’t expect you to understand!”

Her anger came across more like a pained wail, and her words struck Shohi right in the heart. She reminded him so much of Rimi when they’d first met. She’d seemed so lost and anxious.

Is this girl like Rimi? Has she spent her life sad, anxious, and afraid? Is that why she obsesses over freedom?

But there was a key difference between Aisha and Rimi.

“But you still have a responsibility as part of the royal family,” Shohi said.

“Again with responsibility! That’s all anybody will ever talk about! I already told you, I don’t care!”

“‘I don’t care’ isn’t good enough. Pull yourself together. We’re returning to the palace.”

There had been a time when Shohi had given no thought to responsibility. All he’d cared about was being a powerful emperor. But it was a tragic thing for a man in his position to forget about responsibility. He’d since learned that from the people who supported and relied on him as emperor.

“No,” Aisha said.

“We’re going,” Shohi insisted, grabbing the princess’s wrist.

Weakened though she was, she managed to pull away from his grip.

“I said no! I don’t care about my responsibility!”

“You stupid little...!”

Without thinking, he slapped the princess across the cheek.

“You run off and do whatever you want with no care for your responsibility, but you don’t even see the damage it does! Prince Shar has been wracked with worry! We’ve had the Konkokuan army running in circles looking for you! The ministers, Rimi, and everyone else has been desperate to find you! And now, because you decided to idiotically wander into a brothel, men are going to get beheaded! They may be scum, but you really mean to tell me that you don’t care about two men who are going to have their heads lopped off?!”

Aisha held her cheek and looked at the emperor in shock. Despite his anger, a part of Shohi’s mind remained lucid as he looked into her innocent blue eyes.

It really does feel like I’m looking at the old me. Ignorant of everything around me and flailing in anger. That’s why I’m so upset. Why I want to help her understand.

He felt like he needed to take her by the hand. She was clever but still had growing up to do. She needed someone to guide her.

“Stop fighting and just come,” Shohi said in a gentler tone.

Aisha hung her head. Her shoulders began to shake as she broke into tears. Maybe it was her shabby attire, but despite her gorgeous face, she looked more like a sweet child as she cried.

The princess continued to weep as Shohi took her by the hand and helped her off the bed.

She walked all the way here from the Palace of the Water Spirit. She must be starving. I should have the shrew eat some of Rimi’s cooking once we’re back.

Rimi’s cooking always managed to put Shohi’s heart at ease. A full belly could clear the mind and make it possible to think more positively.

The relationship between Konkoku and Saisakoku seemed to be safe for another day. As Shohi realized that, the tension and panic that had been building inside him for hours began to unravel. What he wanted now was a nice break.

I want some of Rimi's food.

He led Aisha by the hand out of the brothel.



Aisha couldn't stop her tears as she followed Shohi out.

I just want to be free. I want it so badly... But I'll never be free.

All her attempts at freedom had managed to do was cause trouble for others and put herself in danger. She didn't need Shohi's lectures for her to realize that. The knowledge hung on her like a lead weight.

I need to stop hoping for freedom. My only choice at this point is to cling to dance, keep telling myself it's freedom, and live my miserable life.

Somewhere deep down, she had always known that was her fate. And no matter how much she insisted that her dance was hers, it was a pitifully tiny thing.

When the brothel master had her pinned to the bed, Aisha had thought about biting off her own tongue and letting herself drown in blood. And who had come to her rescue but the man she'd attempted to pin her disappearance on, Shohi. Yet all he'd blamed her for was her uncle's heartache, his servants' efforts, and the death of his people.

Perhaps the young, beautiful emperor wasn't as awful a person as Aisha had thought.

But he's the emperor, and he's responsible for returning me. Nobody will come to save me.

A carriage was waiting for them in the street as they left the brothel. Aisha could see Setsu Rimi standing alongside Kyo Kunki. Tears of relief streamed from the princess's eyes as she ran toward Rimi.

Rimi looked around the area as Aisha boarded the carriage. Shusei was nowhere to be found.

I really wanted to thank him and apologize one more time, but...

Shohi had already mounted his horse and was preparing to order the men back to the Palace of the Water Spirit when he noticed Rimi wandering amid the cavalry.

“Rimi,” he said as she happened by his horse, lightly grabbing her shoulder.

The moment the emperor touched her, Rimi yelped and recoiled. She looked up at Shohi with frightened eyes as all the fear from before came flooding back.

“What’s wrong?” he asked with a frown. “Why are you so... Did something happen to you?”

Rimi frantically shook her head. Shohi already had his hands full with Aisha. He didn’t need more things to worry about. Without thinking, she began to squeeze her right hand with her left. The relief that she’d felt when Shusei had held her hand suddenly came back to her. The feel of his hand still lingered.

“No, nothing happened. I’m just...a little overwhelmed by the atmosphere. I’ll be all right,” she said, forcing a smile.

“I see,” Shohi said, clearly relieved. “Well, hurry up and board the carriage.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Rimi said, but she couldn’t bring herself to stop searching the crowd.

Jotetsu seemed to notice and rode up to her.

“Something wrong, Rimi?” he asked.

“Oh, Master Jotetsu. It’s just, Master Shusei was—”

“Don’t say a word about him,” Jotetsu hissed. “Nothing good is gonna come out of His Majesty finding out he helped. He has a soft spot for Shusei, and he’ll end up being so happy about it that he’ll let down his guard. End of the day, Shusei’s the enemy. Never forget that.”

What? What did he just...?

“Go, Rimi. The carriage is waiting,” Jotetsu ordered.

“All right,” she relented.

As Rimi headed for the carriage, she heard Shohi bark her name.

“I’m just getting in now!” she said.

“Well, get going,” he said with a calm nod. “I need you to cook when we get back to the Palace of the Water Spirit.”

“Cook?” Rimi asked with a curious tilt of her head.

If the emperor was just hungry, she felt like he’d simply order her to make something when they returned. But with how Shohi phrased it, he seemed to have something in mind. Then she noticed him looking at the carriage with concern.

He wants me to make something for Princess Aisha.

Something to soothe the heart of a tired, hurt, and miserable girl who had lost her bid for freedom.

Rimi could hear Aisha sobbing from within the carriage. Likely because she had to give up on freedom and follow through with her responsibilities. For a moment, Rimi felt bad for the princess, but something was nagging at her.

Why does Princess Aisha want to be free anyway?

It wasn’t just that she wanted to be able to do whatever she wanted. The problem was that she’d spent her entire life locked up and alienated. She wanted to be free because she was looking for somewhere to belong. Rimi had felt the same living in the palace in Wakoku.

But there’s a big difference between us. Nobody was relying on me for anything. But Princess Aisha has responsibilities.

It wasn’t until she’d been given the responsibility of being Umashi-no-Miya that she’d found her place. Which meant...

Princess Aisha, you can find your place right where you are. You just need to realize it.

Upon returning to the Palace of the Water Spirit, Rimi helped Aisha bathe and

dress. The princess was back to her beautiful self, but she was brutally tired. When Rimi would try and talk to her, all she could manage was a weak nod in response.

After having dressed, Aisha went to see Shar. She found Shohi waiting with the prince.

“Aisha, do you have any idea what you’ve done?” Shar asked coolly. The lack of fury in his voice only made it more frightening.

Rimi was standing behind the princess. Even though she wasn’t the target of the prince’s cold anger and disappointment, she felt it keenly.

“Forgive me, Uncle,” Aisha said faintly with her head hung low.

“I’m not the one you should be apologizing to. You’ve personally inconvenienced Konkoku’s emperor. If he wasn’t such a kind ruler, we would’ve been banished from the country on the spot,” Shar said.

Aisha clutched her hands together in front of her chest. She looked as if she was going to break into tears at any moment. Shohi seemed to recognize that and graciously raised his hand to interrupt.

“I think that’s enough, Prince Shar. It’s over and done with. The ministers and the troops have been rewarded for their hard work, and I don’t think this warrants punishment. The princess was unharmed, after all,” he declared.

Shar spent a few moments in silence, apparently impressed by the emperor’s affability and forthrightness. Finally, he offered a deep Saisakokuan bow.

“You continue to impress me, Your Majesty. Thank you,” he said.

The prince then turned to Aisha.

“Go now. Rest,” he said. His voice was gentle, and it was clear from the pity in his eyes that he knew Aisha was remorseful. But his gesture seemed to do little to ease her self-loathing.

The moment she returned to her room, the princess slumped down on the sofa and refused to move.

“You must be hungry, right? How about I get you something to eat?” Rimi asked, kneeling beside the sofa to caress Aisha’s silver and golden hair.

The princess silently shook her head.

“Now don’t be like that. You’ll feel better if you eat something. Just give me a moment,” Rimi insisted.

She left Aisha’s side and headed for the kitchen. Things were quiet there as it was too early yet for dinner to be prepared. But there were plenty of ingredients. Since Shuri had started working in the kitchen, various Saisakokuan spices had been arranged and were ready to use as well.

Something about being alone made a current of fear and disgust run through Rimi. Memories of the chaos in Annei returned to her mind.

Come on, calm down. You’re okay. You’re safe.

She squeezed her right hand in her left. Memories of Shusei’s warmth began to push the fear away. Remembering his touch made Rimi stronger. It was like he’d passed part of his powerful will to her, cleansing all those negative feelings.

Yeah. I’m okay. Now I have to make something.

Rimi nodded to herself and released her hand.

The question is what!

Rimi began to tie her sleeves back and was pondering about what to cook when she heard Shohi call her name from the doorway.

“Oh, Your Majesty! What brings you to the kitchen?” she asked.

“Well, I’m the one who told you to make something. I’m sure you’re tired too, so I’m sorry to push this on you. I just thought that the shrew might feel better if she had some of your food. Will you make her something? Prince Shar’s already approved it,” he requested.

It warmed Rimi’s heart to see Shohi concerned about Aisha. The princess’s resemblance to his old self angered the emperor, but that was likely the reason why he couldn’t just leave her to suffer either. It was proof that he was continuing to grow.

“I’d be happy to. But it’s going to take time, and while I’m in here, Princess Aisha is alone. Not to mention, food’s never quite as good when you’re eating

alone,” Rimi explained. “So could I ask you for a favor? Go to the princess’s room and talk with her while I cook, and when the food is done, eat it with her. I promise it will help.”

“The shrew’s already miserable, and you want to put me alone in a room with her?” Shohi said with a frown.

“In return, I’ll cook you something that’s guaranteed to satisfy!” Rimi said.

The emperor’s stomach gurgled quietly. He was surely hungry, and the siren call of Rimi’s food was too much for him to ignore.

“Fine,” Shohi said with a reluctant nod. “But I don’t want to wait by myself. Let me bring the Quinary Dragon with me. I’ll just pretend it’s an exotic mouse.”

“Tama’s in my room right now. I’m sure she’ll go with you if you call her. Just tell her she’ll get some tasty food out of the deal.”

Recently, Tama had clearly taken a liking to Shohi. She’d probably be willing to go with him as long as Rimi was still in the Palace of the Water Spirit.

Once Shohi had departed, Rimi lit the stove and poked idly at the fire as she thought.

A tang made with ingredients to calm the nerves would help Princess Aisha settle down. But calming her down isn’t enough. I need to help her understand what freedom truly is.

Rimi was sure that if Aisha could understand the essence of freedom, she’d find some peace. But how could Rimi make the princess understand?

Freedom...is to do as you please, to follow your own will.

The words floated through Rimi’s mind when inspiration suddenly struck.

I know! I’ll have her eat freely.



Aisha was nothing like the four consorts, who were so calm and clever while they served Shohi. And she was certainly not like the airy and nurturing Rimi.

No, Aisha managed to be irredeemably stupid in spite of her intelligence. Yet Shohi couldn’t help but understand part of that stupidity, a fact that annoyed

him. That was why he couldn't just ignore her, and why he thought that maybe eating some of Rimi's food might help.

All the people around Shohi had shown him the error of his ways. He wanted to do the same for the princess.

When Shohi arrived at Rimi's room and called the Quinary Dragon, it crawled out of the bed with a big yawn. It then climbed up his skirt and yawned once more. The emperor asked if the dragon would accompany him to Aisha's room, which got a dissatisfied bristle from the creature. When he did as Rimi suggested and offered food as part of the bargain, its attitude changed.

Oh, fine, it seemed to say as it snuggled up into a ball in the crook of his arm.

Shohi headed to Aisha's room and peeked inside. She was slumped on the sofa, completely motionless.

"Aisha?" he called.

The princess jerked upright in surprise. She blinked several times before looking around for someone to save her. When she realized nobody would be able to help her out of the situation, her head drooped down. The emperor grimaced at her timid demeanor. Her usual stubborn self seemed like a distant dream.

Is this what she's like once you strip away her tough exterior?

Shohi stepped into the room and stood before Aisha.

"I've brought a rare Konkokuan mouse to show you. It's beautiful, isn't it?"

The Quinary Dragon peeked its horned head up from the emperor's arm and glanced curiously at Aisha. The princess perked up as well and her eyes met the divine dragon's. Both of them had beautiful blue eyes.

Aisha's eyes widened as she had obviously never seen such a creature.

"What is it?" she asked.

"It's a mouse," Shohi replied.

"What's it called?"

The emperor froze. The Quinary Dragon was the only being of its kind. It

didn't have any need for a name—it was the Quinary Dragon. The only other name Shohi could think of was the name Rimi had given it.

“Err...Tama,” he answered reluctantly.

Tama gave a small squeak in response.



Aisha eyed the emperor curiously.

The princess had been crying for so long that she felt small and shriveled now. She'd been sitting and wishing she could disappear, and suddenly the emperor had appeared in her room. Surely he'd come to yell at her. It was the only reason she could see for his visit. But after how much of a mess she'd made, Aisha knew she had no choice but to endure his lecturing. Still, she'd already told herself countless times today how stupid she was. She'd braced herself, fearing the angry words to come.

But then he'd mentioned a mouse? Aisha had kept her head down, unsure of what exactly he was saying. The emperor had then come to stand before her, and it suddenly felt like a cool breeze had caressed her cheek.

When the princess had looked up, she'd found herself looking in the blue eyes of a little silver-furred creature.

Small and lovely, it certainly didn't seem like any sort of mouse. With its sleek, glossy fur, slender whiskers, little nubs between its ears, and dainty, birdlike claws, it was absolutely adorable.

Aisha hadn't been able to resist her curiosity when she'd asked what it was. When the emperor had claimed it was a mouse, she'd asked what kind it was. And then he'd said “Tama?” It didn't sound like a mouse species but rather like the name of a pet.

The emperor grabbed a chair and moved it over to the sofa. “Tama” hopped down into his lap and he stroked it gently.

“Beautiful, isn't it?” he asked.

He said nothing more and simply focused on petting Tama. The creature gave a sort of purring sound.

So he's not here to yell at me? What is he here for, then?

Aisha watched Shohi, unsure what to say next.

"What do you think? Would you be willing to let the princess touch you?" he whispered to the "mouse."

Tama lifted its head, looked at Aisha, and then looked into Shohi's eyes. It almost seemed to nod to him.

Aisha's eyes went wide at the exchange.

It understands him? It almost seems like a divine beast.

"That seems to be a yes. Well, would you like to try touching it?" he asked the princess.

She straightened herself up and timidly reached out, bringing her finger to rest on its furry silver back. Tama bristled at the touch, causing Aisha to pull her hand back with a shocked squeak.

"Doesn't it feel nice?" Shohi said with a smile. His expression was a mixture of happiness and pride.

Aisha nodded and softly squeezed the finger that had touched Tama's back.

He's trying to cheer me up.

Shohi surely knew that Aisha had tried to pin the crime of her disappearance on Konkoku. He knew what an idiot she was. So why was he trying to cheer her up? Why would he reach out to a stupid, foolish girl like her?

His sympathy made her want to cry. She felt too happy and embarrassed to look for an answer.

Perhaps he noticed the princess's eyes watering because Shohi shook his head gently.

"Don't cry. There's no need to cry. There's been enough crying today. Cheer up. Rimi will be bringing food soon, so you can look forward to that. She'll have something delicious for us," he said.

There was so much confidence in his words. He clearly believed in Rimi even more than he believed in himself.

I'm jealous.

How proud Aisha would be to have someone trust her like that. No cruel words or harsh looks would be able to hurt the princess if she knew someone had that sort of faith in her. Their belief would make her stronger.

III

Rimi had found a servant boy who prepared a whole duck for her. Meats like beef and pork tended to improve with age, but poultry like duck spoiled quickly, so it needed to be fresh. The servant had plucked and gutted the duck, removed the head and legs, and brought it to her.

“This duck looks great,” Rimi said to herself.

She was happy to see the bird was nice and plump. Ducks were ordinarily smaller than chickens and contained less fat, but the palace raised its own breed that was larger and fatter.

Rimi thoroughly rinsed the cleaned duck, washing away any odor or excess fat. She seasoned and then pumped air inside of it, causing the duck's skin to separate from its flesh. The duck was then left to dry on a hook in a well-ventilated area.

The result would be a signature Konkokuan dish: kaoya, roast duck with a crispy skin.

Once the duck had dried, Rimi put it in the hearth to roast. The skin grew crispy and gave off a wonderful aroma as the meat within was steamed and became tender.

This style of duck was often eaten during celebrations by the common folk, but Rimi had heard of rich gourmets who discarded the whole duck in favor of the skin. They would mix the skin with grated vegetables and ganjiang by putting everything inside of a light flatbread called bo bing. There was apparently a popular style in the south in which they would improve the texture of the skin at the expense of the meat by drying the duck for longer.

Rimi stoked the fire in the hearth and let it heat up. While it did, she pulled

out every ingredient she could find. She ended up with more than ten different kinds of meat, including beef, pork, chicken, dried scallops, shrimp, and jellyfish. From the vegetable baskets came a cornucopia of choices: greens, onions, and gourds, as well as roots mixed with ginger, garlic, and peppers.

“I’ll want to preserve the flavor of the ingredients as much as I can with the meats and dried seafood,” Rimi said, talking to herself as she sorted the ingredients. “I’ll sauté the beef with salt and spices. For the pork and chicken, I’ll offer both sautéed and steamed varieties. I’ll soak the seafood ingredients in water and then boil them in tang to make them slightly salty.”

Rimi soaked the various kinds of seafood in the water while she seasoned the meats. By the time she finished with that, the duck had dried and the hearth was hot. After placing the hook carrying the prepared duck inside the hearth where it could roast, she added some firewood to adjust the heat.

I’ve got to let it take its time roasting until the skin is nice and crisp and the flesh is moist and tender.

Some of the vegetables could be served raw, so Rimi minced and arranged them. For the others, she either steamed and dried them or stir-fried them before chopping everything up. The variety of offerings became staggering as the garnishes were similarly prepared and added to the mix.

Next came the seasoned meats. Rimi put some of the pork and chicken in a steamer. Then, beef, pork, and chicken were placed into their respective iron pans and sautéed in oil.

Crackling emanated from the hearth, accompanied by the scent of cooking fat.

The storehouse had some jitang already prepared, which Rimi brought out. She poured it into a number of pots and added a bit of salt. Then, she put a different kind of seafood in each pot. She supplemented them depending on the seafood, ganjiang here, leeks there, but she wanted the basic flavor to remain light and salty.

I need even more choices, though.

Rimi combed the kitchen for sauces and oils. Sweet ganjiang, spicy xinjiang, a

fermented bean paste called dojiang, xinciyou oil, and sesame oil. She took anything she could find. Once she was done mixing them all together, she took another peek at the hearth. The duck had begun to take on the color of fox fur.

“All right, almost there.”

The next step was to create a batter by mixing potato starch, salt, and water in a bowl. The batter was then ladled into a heated iron pan where it formed a palm-sized pool and began to spread itself thin. The moment the edges began to curl upwards, Rimi pulled the fluffy flatbread from the pan and laid it on a plate before beginning to cook another. The result was bo bing.

Rimi sliced the sautéed beef, pork, and chicken into hunks about half the size of her palm. She then did the same with the steamed pork and chicken.

By the time the consort had finished making one hundred slices of bo bing, the light outside the kitchen had faded entirely.

The meal within the hearth announced its completion with the smoky scent of crisp duck skin.

Rimi pulled the finished product from the hearth and removed only the skin. Like she'd done with the meats, she cut it into half-palm-sized chunks. She then did the same with the stripped duck.

One by one, she placed the ingredients on matching pure white plates. She adjusted the plating so no one ingredient stood out more than another.

In all, the meal consisted of five types of garnish, three types of sauce, seven types of meat, five types of seafood, and ten types of vegetables. There were thirty different dishes in all, not including the dish piled high with bo bing.

Finally, Rimi made a tang with umifu, kengyoken, beaten eggs, and a light sprinkling of salt.

After searching for Shuri and explaining that she wanted to bring everything to Aisha's room, he returned with servant boys to help carry the dishes.

“Your Majesty, Princess Aisha, your meal is served,” Rimi announced with a bow.

At the far end of the room, Shohi sat in a chair with Tama cradled in his lap. Aisha gazed at the little dragon from a sofa that the chair was placed alongside. One could hardly call it a lively atmosphere, but Rimi was relieved to see that things were peaceful.

Shuri and the other servants brought the dishes into the room. They placed them on a table before departing. Rimi approached the table and filled two bowls with some of the beaten egg soup.

“Everything is ready for you. Please, come eat,” she beckoned.

Shohi stood, causing Tama to bounce down from his lap. The dragon came darting over to Rimi, scrambling up her skirt and onto her shoulder.

I missed you! the dragon seemed to say as she wrapped herself in Rimi’s hair.

The emperor was calm as he slipped into a seat, but Aisha was timid and shaky as she took a seat opposite him.

Rimi provided each of them with chopsticks, a bowl of egg tang, and a white plate. Sitting in the center of the table between them were thirty-one different dishes.

Rimi closed her eyes and bowed deeply.

May this meal be of help to both His Majesty and Princess Aisha.

Somewhere deep inside of her, the consort felt like she could hear her Saigu sister speaking to her.

You must be prepared to fight to force the god to admit satisfaction, my Umashi-no-Miya.

Rimi’s core had been rattled and unsteady, but she suddenly felt everything inside of her align and fall into place.

Yes, Lady Saigu. I am.

The Umashi-no-Miya opened her eyes.



Aisha’s eyes went wide. There was something different about Rimi.

She doesn’t look any different, but something’s definitely changed.

It was like something sacred had awakened inside of Rimi. Instantly, the atmosphere around her changed.

In Saisakoku, there were myths of the gods disguising themselves as humans, only to reveal themselves at a dramatic moment. When Aisha had heard of such tales, she'd always imagined that there'd be a grand plume of smoke and music as the god emerged in all their splendor.

But maybe it was more like this. A silent gust of wind that suddenly unearthed their true nature.

Shuri and Uncle both said she's a splendid cook.

In that case, maybe now as she went to serve them, she was combining food and the divine.



Rimi raised her head.

"There is bo bing in the center of the table. There are also ingredients, sauces, and garnishes to put on it. Please, make whatever sort of wrap you like. I call this meal zizaibao, free will wraps," she explained.

"R-Rimi, sit down and eat with us! I caused so much trouble for you, it's not right for me to sit here eating while you aren't," Aisha stammered.

"No no, don't mind me," Rimi said, shaking her head and smiling. "My purpose here is to serve you and His Majesty. I'll be right here doing whatever I can to make sure you two are satisfied."

"But—"

"Enough," Shohi interrupted. "I asked Rimi to cook, and so she has."

Rimi didn't believe that the emperor had managed to work out the intention behind this dish just from seeing it. But he believed in her. She had created a dish, and that was enough for him to speak out on her behalf.

Thank you, Your Majesty.

Having someone's faith was a joy like no other. And since he had faith in her, she had a duty to fulfill it.

“We eat,” Shohi commanded, reaching for a piece of bo bing.

Aisha seemed torn for a moment, but between the emperor taking the lead and Rimi encouraging the princess with a nod and a smile, she reached out for a piece of her own.



“All right, but the question is what am I supposed to make?” Shohi said with bo bing in hand, stumped by the array of offerings.

With the sauces and garnishes, there were thirty different ingredients. What meat should he choose? Which garnishes? Which sauces might match well? Should he pick just one ingredient? Two? Three? More? With so many possible combinations, he didn’t know where to start.

“Make whatever you like in whatever fashion you prefer,” Rimi rather unhelpfully said with a grin.

What, I’m supposed to just choose? How do I know what would taste best together? There are too many choices here. Are you really going to be able to say you gave us something good? It’s like you’re telling us “Do whatever you want, see if I care!”

“If you let yourself choose freely, I’m sure you’ll discover a taste you love,” Rimi continued.

Ah! That’s it, is it? There’s probably an ideal combination here that Rimi’s thought of. She’s served us something good, but now she’s saying “You’re free to try and find it.”

Shohi gave a wry smile. Freedom. What a troublesome word.

“So I get to pick freely to make a wrap? That sounds fun!” Aisha said with sparkling eyes.

The princess’s spirit had been deflated, but tickling her natural sense of adventure was enough to bring some life back to her. She picked up her chopsticks and began placing ingredients on a piece of bo bing.

“This abalone looks good. What would go well with that? Cabbage, maybe? What about the garnish? Should I do ginger? Leeks? What would be good for

the sauce?” Aisha asked excitedly.

“You’re free to choose whatever you like,” Rimi said without breaking her smile.

“You’re right! Okay, I’ll just try what I like!”

The princess picked the soft, boiled abalone, cabbage, ginger, and xinciyou sauce, wrapped up the results, and ate it in two bites.

“Mmm, that was good, but maybe that combination would’ve been better with shrimp,” Aisha said, nodding to herself.

The bo bing wraps were small and thin, which meant that the number of ingredients they could hold was limited. Even a dainty girl like Aisha should have only been able to eat ten.

But there are thirty plates here. They all have the same design and the same amount of food on them, so none stand out. There’s no obvious choice.

If it was clear which was supposed to be the main ingredient, you could start there and try different side ingredients and sauces. But if you didn’t even know what the dish’s base was, then it multiplied the number of possible choices.

Shohi tried a wrap made of steamed chicken, ginger, onion, and ganjiang.

“Not bad. But maybe I should pick a spicier sauce,” he considered aloud.

Aisha was already onto her second wrap, this one with shrimp.

“Yum! Hmm, but maybe it doesn’t really need the cabbage?” the princess pondered as she looked over the ingredients again. For her third wrap, she landed on the duck.

“If you use vegetables as your base, you might find the seafood juices are a good alternative to the sauce. It’s a lovely, light flavor,” Rimi suggested.

“I never would’ve thought of that!” Aisha said eagerly.

The princess gobbled down her squash and duck wrap, then she quickly grabbed her fourth piece of bo bing. Aisha seemed to think over the combination as she diligently followed Rimi’s suggestion.

The emperor watched the princess as he reached for his second piece of bo

bing.



Aisha couldn't believe how much fun she was having.

"I've never eaten like this before!" she said.

"Is it good?" Shohi asked as the princess reached for her fifth wrap.

"Yes, it's great," she said.

"What do you think tastes the best out of what we have here? Would you suggest a combination of ingredients?" he asked.

"Of course!" Aisha said, lighting up at the emperor's suggestion.

Five, six, seven wraps. The princess continued trying different combinations, but her stomach began to groan. Aisha thought she should stop, but she had yet to try more than half of the ingredients. There were still so many combinations that hadn't been tried.

Aisha looked at the emperor and noticed his second piece of bo bing was still sitting on his plate. He seemed to be waiting for something as well. When she realized that he was waiting for her to recommend ingredients, she became panicked.

Out of everything I've tried, I'd say everything was tasty. Nothing tasted bad. But as for what's the best, I don't know...

The second wrap Aisha had tried, with shrimp, cabbage, ginger, and xinciyou sauce was probably the tastiest. But she'd felt like it might not have needed the cabbage. Onion might have been better than ginger as well. But she hadn't gotten to try that yet.

And I haven't even tasted more than half of the ingredients. How am I supposed to know what tastes best?

"Something stopping you?" Shohi asked calmly. "What would you recommend, Aisha?"

Chapter 7: The Festival of Fulfillment

I

Aisha had no idea how to answer.

"I don't know yet. If you can give me some time, I'll be able to decide," she said.

"How long do I have to wait?" Shohi asked.

"Just...a little longer."

"You're telling me that you can find the ideal combination out of the thirty ingredients here?"

The emperor suddenly began to slide his finger across the table. He seemed to be writing out numbers, as if he was calculating something.

"We have thirty dishes, and even spreading sauce on a piece of bo bing is an option. Think of all the possible combinations. If you only took two ingredients, you would have 435 different options. With three ingredients, it's 4,060. Four would be 27,405. And with five, you have *142,506 different combinations*," Shohi calculated.

Aisha's eyes went wider with each number. All put together, nearly two hundred thousand options were possible. Trying to find the best taste out of that many choices was no small feat. The realization made the princess's temper suddenly flare.

"It's impossible to find your favorite then! Did you know that already?! Were you just being mean?!" Aisha said, reflexively jumping to her feet.

Shohi's expression was unmoved.

"I did. I realized it from the beginning, but you didn't," he answered.

"So you were just being mean!"

“Would you have preferred if I said that to begin with? How would you have reacted if I told you it’s too hard to choose from so many options, or if I suggested having Rimi tell you what to make?” Shohi asked. “Would you really have let yourself be restricted after being told you could choose freely?”

“Well, I...”

Aisha likely would’ve balked at the idea. She’d been told to choose freely, so she wanted to do just that.

But what would the outcome be? She only had so many attempts, and with such an enormous number of combinations, she’d never be able to find what tasted best.

Shohi slowly rose to his feet as well and pointed down at the table.

“This is freedom. Well, have you enjoyed it, Aisha?” he asked.

She had at first. Trying this, trying that. It had been fun and exciting. But once she’d begun to see her limits, she realized she’d never be able to find what she liked best. And while everything had been tasty, this “zizaibao” hadn’t offered anything exceptional.

“Freedom, freedom, freedom. You talk about it all the time. But is freedom really so great? I think when the choices become infinite, you end up not being able to choose anything,” the emperor explained. “Without a core, without something to anchor yourself to, you can’t hold on to anything. You end up living meaninglessly.”

Aisha looked at the thirty plates arranged on the table. Her stomach felt heavy, yet without any of the fulfillment of a truly delicious meal. She wanted to throw herself on the ground, pound her fists, and cry.

“So there might not be any combination that’s truly delicious,” the princess said.

“No,” Rimi cut in immediately. “I swore to His Majesty that I would serve something delicious. If I perform my responsibility and select the right combination of ingredients in the right proportions, it will be delicious.”

Rimi approached the table and picked up a piece of bo bing and a pair of

chopsticks. First, she began to pile ingredients onto the flatbread without hesitation, making one wrap. Then, she made a second wrap with different ingredients. She put them both on a plate, which she placed before Aisha.

“This is the zizaibao I was responsible for making. Go ahead and give it a try,” Rimi said.

The princess looked down at the pair of wraps. She picked up the first and took a bite.

This is it!

It tasted like the shrimp wrap Aisha had made before, which she thought would’ve been delicious if she’d considered the combination a bit more. But this time, jellyfish and mellow squash had joined the shrimp. The vinegary, sesame oil sauce gave it a refreshing, full-bodied flavor as well. It was light yet robust, and the textural combination of shrimp and jellyfish was superb.

This is the flavor I wanted. It’s so perfectly firm and chewy.

Aisha finished the first wrap and then moved on to the second. As the princess bit down, she could feel a crunch between her teeth and the scent of duck filled her nose. It had been made with kaoya. She could also taste the onion mixing with the aromatic scorched duck skin. Sweet ganjiang coated her tongue.

The wrap had been made with few ingredients to preserve the texture of the skin, but the onions and the spicy-sweet sauce helped elevate the duck skin’s flavor.

“But how did you pick these out of so many combinations? How were you able to make this?” Aisha asked.

“I hoped to please His Majesty by serving duck, which he doesn’t have very often, and shrimp, which is one of his favorites. I just had to consider His Majesty’s preferences, the compatibility of the ingredients, and what has the most interesting textures,” Rimi explained. “Once I’d done that, it was simple, even with this many options. All I had to do was think in terms of my responsibility to His Majesty.”

For some reason, Aisha could feel her vision blur.

Rimi's responsibility is to cook for the emperor, so she was able to think up something he would like. But I couldn't even come up with something for myself. I just jumped around in any random direction, grabbing whatever I was hungry for. In the end, I never found my way.

Rimi made this out of a sense of responsibility. Responsibility, the very concept that Aisha had detested and run from for so long, created this.

"Rimi..." Aisha murmured.

"Yes?" the consort said.

"It's delicious."

"Thank you very much," Rimi said with a brilliant smile.

Seeing her smile so blissfully made Aisha's anger and frustration with herself even worse. She felt sad. The princess was so jealous of Rimi for being able to smile like that.

A mass of emotion began to swell inside of Aisha, and her tears started to overflow. She sat down in her seat and buried her face in her hands.

It's delicious.



The princess's shoulders began to quake as she buried her face. Shohi knew he'd driven her to tears, but he hadn't wanted to make her cry. She just reminded him of his past self, and the emperor wanted to teach her something he'd learned.

I didn't mean to make her cry.

Shohi glanced at Rimi, who gave him a small nod. She'd guessed that Shohi was trying to guide the princess, and she'd made something appropriate for that. He hadn't realized the intention behind the dish at first glance, but as his chopsticks moved, the emperor had begun to understand. That was why he'd ordered Aisha to pick the ideal combination.

Rimi had carried out her responsibility. It was time for Shohi to take responsibility for making Aisha cry. He needed to comfort her.

The emperor approached the princess hesitantly and reached out to

awkwardly hold her trembling shoulders.

“Don’t cry,” he gently commanded.



Shohi’s kind voice and the feel of his silk sleeves embracing her just made Aisha cry even harder. She could tell he hadn’t been doing this to be mean, but that just made her feelings all the more intense.

What even was the freedom that she’d so desperately been hoping for? Was it something to cling to because she wasn’t accepted anywhere? Was it a way of escaping this misery?

I clung tightly to the idea that dance was my only freedom. I protected it and viewed it as more important than anything else. But what was I actually looking for? What made me cling to dance as freedom in the first place?

Aisha had escaped into dance because she’d never belonged anywhere. Dance let her forget all the things that she hated, making her desperate to protect it. If the people of the palace wouldn’t accept her, she decided that she needed to protect the one domain she could call her own.

But it had never been freedom itself that the princess had longed for. All she’d managed to do was turn her back on her surroundings, cling to dance, and try to console herself by insisting that it was freedom.

In the end, I didn’t even know what freedom meant. The freedom I found when I escaped ended up chaining me.

The world she’d escaped into could be too vast and confusing to find solid ground in. What pain awaited while trying to grab hold of something firm? She could end up more miserable than she already was.

I never even thought about it.

Rimi didn’t seem like a very free person, yet she could smile so blissfully. Shohi too. Being emperor didn’t seem very liberating. But he was kind and caring toward Aisha, whom he must have been sick of by now, without being subservient. It must have been because he took his responsibility as emperor so seriously. He’d surrounded himself with people he could trust, and there didn’t seem to be a shadow of unhappiness in him.

What Rimi made was delicious. But I...

The taste of freedom was so indistinct. It could be delicious but also mundane. It was too elusive.

But the taste that Rimi had created through responsibility had been so concrete. So delicious. She'd been able to create something delicious by carrying out her responsibility.

Shohi, Shar, and Rimi. Aisha was envious of all of them. They all knew what was expected of them, and they worked tirelessly to carry it out. It was enviable.

"If freedom isn't that great, then what should I be looking for?" Aisha asked between sobs.

"Responsibility," Rimi answered gently. "I think that will end up giving you what you want."

Aisha twitched in surprise.

The thing I've been running from has been what I've been wishing for?

The realization hit the princess fast and hard. Maybe it was because she realized the truth to Rimi's words. How could she ever get what she'd yearned for by spending her whole life running from it? But the longer Aisha had gone without finding what she was looking for, the more she'd pushed away her responsibilities. And what she'd longed for had drifted further and further away.

In that case...



Rimi had spent her childhood sad and ashamed. It was only after she'd been given the duty of supporting the Saigu as the Umashi-no-Miya that she had felt okay about her existence.

Having a duty, having responsibility, meant there was somewhere you belonged.

"You have a great responsibility as a member of the royal family, Princess Aisha. If you face it and work hard, you'll find somewhere you belong," Rimi

explained.

The princess was a clever girl. She'd likely already realized that. The proof was in how much harder she'd begun to cry.

If she really had no place in the world and no responsibilities, she'd be forced to suffer the pain of searching without direction, desperately hoping to find something. But Aisha had her responsibilities as a royal. It was a blessed thing. It might be a difficult, painful role, but running from it would not bring her any happiness.

There was power in a name. Rimi had named their dish zizaibao. Zizai means to do whatever one wants. But freedom could not be wrapped up, and the flavor suffered for it. Even when acting freely, one needed a firm center.

Aisha had likely realized that. As she raised her face, her tears poured endlessly, and her shoulders shook like a child's.

"If I focus on my responsibilities, I'll get what I want?" she asked. The princess sounded like a child seeking reassurance from her mother.

"Yes, responsibilities can be difficult, but I know you can do it," Rimi said with a bright smile. "You are beautiful, clever, and you dance like a divine."

"But how do I do that? I've spent so long running from responsibility that I don't know how."

"That's a good question. I suppose you should take things one step at a time and do what's expected of you. Does anything come to mind? Just start anywhere."

"Anywhere? Can I really just do whatever?" Aisha questioned.

"Of course. You can hardly be expected to do something big and difficult right away."

Tears welled in Aisha's eyes as she silently looked up at Rimi's easy smile.

"Well then... I'll dance," she said after a few moments. "I'll dance at the Festival of Fulfillment."



Her dance was what everyone wanted the most from Aisha. It was why she'd been sent here. It would please her father, satisfy her uncle's duty, and show to all the court officials that Shohi had established a good relationship with Saisakoku.

"I think that's a great idea, Princess Aisha," Rimi said.

"I'll do it. I'll dance."

As Aisha reaffirmed her decision, big, round tears began to spill from her eyes once more.

"I thought I said to stop crying," Shohi said, unsure of what to do with Aisha's endless tears. "Are you crying because of me? I'm sorry, I didn't mean to make you cry."

Aisha seemed surprised by the apology and shook her head.

"You don't have to apologize, Your Majesty. If anyone should be apologizing..." she trailed off in a shaky voice and more tears rolled down her cheeks.

"Fine, we'll call it even. It's over now, so smile," Shohi said, smiling.

There must have been someone who guided and chastised Shohi to make him into the emperor he was at that moment. Now that he was passing this guidance onward, taking on the role of leader and guide, the emperor seemed to be taking a step toward new heights.

The princess finally managed a smile at his urging, her eyes glittering with tears. Rimi was struck by Aisha's sheer beauty.

Look, Lady Saigu. Have you ever seen something so beautiful?

Brilliantly done, my Umashi-no-Miya, came a voice from within her.

Aisha's smile was infectious. Rimi found herself smiling as well.

II

A thick curtain of darkness had fallen. Shusei, happy to be away from

watching eyes, had loosened his shenyi and lounged on his sofa. The night was still. There was no wind to rustle the silent bamboo, nor to come through the open windows to make the stuffy air any less brutal.

A lone candle flickered softly on the desk.

The feeling just won't go away.

The scholar raised his right hand and looked at it. That was the first time he'd ever hit someone with his full might. Even now, his hand ached terribly, and the memory of the man's nose breaking beneath his fist wouldn't leave him.

Before the Shu family had adopted Shusei, he remembered getting into fights with other street children. But those had been scuffles between kids. He'd never given himself over to rage and put all his weight behind his fist. It didn't matter who they were or what the situation was, he was extremely reluctant to harm someone.

Today, there had been no reluctance. Nothing to hold him back.

When Shusei had seen that man looming over Rimi, the scholar had seen red. He'd dragged the man off of her and just started battering him around.

But another feeling lingered on the other side of his hand. Rimi's soft, trembling hand, curled in his palm.

If Shohi had learned of Shusei's presence there, it would've been nothing but trouble. Perhaps the Ho House would've been suspected of aiding in Aisha's little adventure. Or perhaps Shohi would believe Shusei had come to aid the emperor. Either outcome was a problem. As chaotic as it had been, the head of the Ho House never should have stepped out into view where Kunki or the soldiers could have spotted him. But he hadn't been able to stop himself.

"Nice work today, Lord Ho," Jotetsu suddenly called from the darkness of the window.

Shusei jumped up in surprise but quickly lowered himself back into his seat.

"Can I help you?" the scholar asked.

"I just figured you'd want to know what happened with our little runaway. You put so much effort into finding her, after all," Jotetsu said as he slipped

through the windowsill and leaned against the desk. “She’s back at the Palace of the Water Spirit. His Majesty had Rimi cheer her up with some food. It did the trick, and apparently, she’s going to dance at the festival. You really don’t want His Majesty to know you helped? You must have been expecting something when you agreed to help us.”

“I expected nothing. Telling him is unnecessary. I don’t want him to misunderstand and get his hopes up,” Shusei said.

“Then why’d you help?”

“Konkoku’s economic future hung in the balance. I couldn’t just do nothing.”

“That’s all?” Jotetsu asked, apparently disappointed.

“That’s all,” Shusei replied coldly.

“Well then, see you around,” the spy said, slipping back through the window and into darkness.

The bamboo rustled faintly. A light wind had begun to blow.



A few days had passed since the chaos of the imperial princess’s disappearance. Preparations for the Festival of Fulfillment were underway in the palace. Soon, delegates from Konkoku’s vassals, friends, and potential partners would all gather together and mingle with the Konkokuan royal family. It would be a grand banquet and a display of Konkoku’s splendor. But such an affair needed more than five days to arrange.

For the cooks, that meant coming up with a menu, collecting the ingredients, and breaking their backs to produce the ludicrous quantity of food needed to entertain five hundred people.

And then, after five days of preparation, the final night of Qi would arrive, and the Festival of Fulfillment would begin.

A vast garden stretched across the Hall of New Harmony’s north end, but in spite of the term “garden,” it was devoid of trees or plants. Instead, it was a field of polished white stone. Elaborate carvings of every manner adorned the

stone featuring divine beasts like dragons, qilin, and phoenixes, as well as creatures of the earth like turtles, tigers, and lions. There were also carvings of flowers representing each of the four seasons. All of these carvings were so expansive and elaborate that when taken in all together, they were similar to a white stone carpet of engravings.

Long tables had been laid out across the courtyard where five hundred people from within and outside of Konkoku would be seated. At the far northern end of the courtyard was a raised platform, which had a long table with mother-of-pearl inlays stretched across the platform. At the center of it was the chair in which the emperor would sit. Alongside his were seats for the four consorts, and slightly below his position were seats for the chancellor and the six ministers.

The delegates from the lands most important to Konkoku were being given seats to the north, closest to the emperor. The closest seat of all was granted to Prince Gulzari Shar. As Shar arrived, dressed in resplendent clothes bearing silver and gold embroidery, he brought with him other members of his delegation, including Shuri and the other servant boys who attended to the prince.

At the south end of the courtyard, a stage had been erected. It was made of wood and stood at about twice the height of the average person. A gorgeous curtain had been stretched around it.

Delegates, officials, and members of the royal family began to fill the empty seats. The emperor and the four consorts took their seats as well. It was a hot night, and the brimming excitement made it even hotter.

The servants brought out fifty pots of chilled wine, which they ladled out into cups for the guests. Immense dishes, big enough to carry a person on, were brought out as well. They contained everything from sweet and sour soup to fried dishes heavy with sauce and aromatic vinegared vegetables. The scent of whole-roasted pigs and chickens also filled the air.

Some of the delegates in attendance had succeeded in their missions. Others had failed. One thing they all shared was that everyone would be leaving the next day. Everyone seemed friendly and joyful, perhaps excited to finally be

returning home. The Konkokuan officials looked similarly relieved that Qi was ending.

A gong sounded, demanding silence.

“His Majesty speaks,” Jin Keiyu announced as the buzz of the crowd faded.

Shohi stood and raised his cup.

“I wish prosperity for all who have come to visit our land!” the emperor proclaimed. He then drained his cup in a single gulp.

“Cheers!” the delegates called out in their native languages.

“His Majesty has such a good speaking voice,” Rimi mumbled, her attention pulled to the north side by Shohi’s toast.

The consort was beneath the stage on the southern end. With the curtain hiding the lower part of the stage, she couldn’t see anything happening outside, much less Shohi. But she could hear him clearly as his voice echoed across the stone field.

“Not much longer now,” Aisha said stiffly as Rimi helped dress her.

“Are you nervous?” Rimi asked.

The consort adjusted Aisha’s thin veil and combed the princess’s silken hair, which was neither quite gold nor quite silver. She then took a step back to appraise her work.

She’s stunning.

Even shrouded in the curtain’s darkness, Aisha’s ethereal white skin stood out. Her hair was as soft and fine as Tama’s fur, and her blue eyes glistened beautifully. Delicate, intricate works of gold and jewels adorned her brow, neck, and hands. Her ornate Saisakokuan dress came together in perfect ruffles. Every part of her appearance was in perfect harmony.

Tama seemed to sense Rimi’s sigh from within the consort’s skirt. She peeked her head out to look at Aisha and gave a little squeak that sounded like the dragon’s own version of a sigh.

“A bit. I’ve never danced for a crowd like this before,” Aisha responded.

Rimi smiled, trying to give the princess some peace of mind.

“If anyone can do it, it’s you. You’ll be fine,” she said.

With the festival beginning, the performance would also start soon. Entertainment was important for livening up a party, especially in its early stages.

Aisha’s hair was adorned with the golden comb that Shar had given to her. She’d once denied the comb and her uncle’s request, but now she chose to wear it and abide by his wishes. Rimi understood why. Prince Shar had a duty to fulfill, and wearing the comb was Aisha’s way of saying that she would do her part too. It was a sign that she had begun to set her sights on fulfilling her responsibilities.

“Rimi, thank you for everything. I know I’ve been a lot of trouble,” the princess said.

Aisha then stuck her tongue out playfully. All the brightness she’d had at their first meeting had returned.

The days since the princess’s disappearance had been full of fun. Aisha had played with Tama while Rimi cooked for her. Sometimes Shohi would come by, speaking in a nervous but cheerful tone. It reminded Rimi of the days when her duty was to attend to her Saigu sister. It felt like returning to a time long past.

But today would be the end of it.

Rimi’s duties would be coming to an end tonight. Once the princess had finished her dance, Aisha would immediately be returning to the Palace of the Water Spirit while Rimi would go to the rear palace to rest. The princess’s things had already been packed. The next morning, the Saisakokuan delegation would leave the Palace of the Water Spirit and return home. Now would be Aisha and Rimi’s only chance to say goodbye.

“Um, Rimi? Do you think—” Aisha began, but the unique sound of Saisakokuan instruments cut her off. The princess looked up and then turned excitedly to Rimi. “I’ve got to go!”

Rimi watched Aisha dart up to the stage above. The consort then stepped through the curtain out of the lower part of the stage so she could openly

watch the performance. The scent of wine and food was thick in the air and excited chattering in a myriad of languages echoed across the courtyard.

Musicians with Saisakokuan instruments lined the edge of the stage, playing together in a unique, quavering harmony. It had captured the attention of all the diplomats in attendance. With all eyes focused on the stage, Aisha fluttered out from behind a curtain and into view. Like a delicate cloth settling to the ground, she kneeled before everyone in attendance.

For a moment, she was completely still. The onlookers had seemed only curious at first, but the princess's skillful movements and her sudden stillness drew their full attention.



As Aisha kneeled on the stage, she pondered a question.

This is my responsibility. So what do I do now?

The goal was to lay the groundwork for a diplomatic relationship between Saisakoku and Konkoku. So she needed to show that. Realizing what she needed to do, the princess slowly raised her head.

"I, Imperial Princess Aisha of Saisakoku, have come today to dance for you. To the prosperity of Konkoku, her emperor, and the budding friendship between our lands!" Aisha announced. She then smiled, looked down at Shar in the audience, and winked.

This is what my father wanted you to do, right, Uncle? Get me to dance and announce to the world our intention to establish a relationship with Konkoku?

Shar's eyes widened. He'd been surprised and delighted when Aisha had announced she would dance at the festival, but he probably hadn't realized that the princess knew how important her role actually was. After a few shocked blinks, the prince gave a big nod.

It's in your hands now, his eyes seemed to say.

The sitar sang, its sound thin and taut as a thread. As if yanked upwards by that thread, Aisha rose to her feet. She spread her arms and began to weave them back and forth. A zither joined the sitar, and her legs swept outward to match it. As the whistles joined the song, the princess began to twirl, her arms

weaving through the air while her feet moved in complex patterns.

Every motion was sweet and lovely. The princess mimicked plucking a flower, which she brought briefly to her lips. She then recoiled from the phantom flower as if embarrassed.

Aisha flicked a glance at Shohi, who seemed pleased as he watched the dance. She felt as if he was praising her for a job well done. She felt joyful. Ecstatic. Her heart felt light, as did her body. She felt like a goddess of dance, able to move in whatever way she pleased.

That feeling of complete freedom of expression... The princess felt as if she may have found what she was looking for.

Aisha had a duty, and she would fulfill it. This sensation, built upon her responsibility, felt only a bit different than the freedom she'd been seeking. It was the freedom of choosing within one's responsibilities. She could say without doubt or any insecurity that this was her responsibility and her choice. It gave her a clear feeling of satisfaction.

Her dance was sweet and light, but suddenly, the flute sounded a sharp note and the princess leaped into the air. She was lithe, like a glistening, silvery fish leaping from the ocean. Her beauty drew cheers from the audience.

III

One could feel the conscious perfection in every little movement and every flutter of Aisha's dress. And yet, while every part of the dance was sharply honed, there was also a soft, effortless joy in her motions.

The princess's dance was vibrant. There was dazzling confidence to it, as if she were proclaiming to the world that this was where she belonged. Her unshakeable strength and enchanting grace were on full display. Anyone would be captivated by such a dance, and the emperor and his four consorts were no exception.



They said she was marvelous, but I never expected this.

Shohi could never have imagined that such an arrogant shrew was capable of putting on such a display. Satisfaction peeked through his exasperated smile. This was the same girl who'd been crowing about freedom and catching treats in her mouth?

The music began to build in intensity, and Aisha spun faster and faster to match it. Her speed and dexterity were breathtaking. When the music crescendoed, the princess soared into the air. Roars erupted from the audience at the impressive display.

The intense song culminated in a final crash of sound. The dance ended just as sharply, with the princess dropping into a motionless kneel.

For a few long moments, the audience was locked in breathless silence. Then, all at once, the crowd erupted into thunderous applause.

Shohi stood and walked briskly toward the stage. Some called out to him in confusion and curiosity, but his stride never ceased. When the princess realized he was approaching, her eyes went wide and she jumped to her feet. The emperor climbed the stage, walked up to Aisha, and smiled.

"A superb display! Allow me to express my appreciation to both the emperor of Saisakoku for his thoughtfulness and to Princess Aisha for conveying it!" Shohi proclaimed. His words not only reinforced the message of harmony between their lands to all in attendance, but they also served to sway the feelings of any who might be torn between supporting him or the Ho House.

But more than anything, Shohi was genuinely happy to see Aisha step up and fulfill her duty. The emperor felt such pride. He wondered if this was how an old master felt when he saw a student succeed.

"I've never in my life met a dancer like you. I'm truly impressed," Shohi said.

"I'm honored, Your Majesty. But I feel like I can't accept your praise without giving you a formal apology," Aisha said.

Her expression turned serious, and Shohi tilted his head in confusion.

"My thoughtless actions forced you to put two of your citizens to death. As

princess of Saisakoku, I must apologize,” she continued. “I want to take this opportunity to make a formal apology. Please, forgive me, Your Majesty.”

The princess kneeled and bowed her head deeply. Shohi was shocked by the earnest display, but the smile quickly returned to his face.

“As much as I hated doing it, I raised my hand against you in that moment. I’d like to apologize as well. But of course, I forgive you. So please, accept my compliments. You are every bit the jewel they call you,” Shohi replied.

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” the princess said. She stood and gave an elegant bow. Then suddenly, her deeply serious expression turned to an impish one. “But if you liked my dance that much, I suppose I could join the rear palace if you’d like?”

With all the cheers and applause, only Shohi heard her words. He smiled sheepishly and looked down at Rimi, who was gazing up at the stage in spellbound awe. She had likely been so mesmerized by the dance that her mind had gone blank. That was exactly why having Rimi beside him set his mind at ease. When he was in her arms, he could sleep easy.

I wonder, if I didn’t have Rimi, would I be able to accept Aisha?

Aisha was flawed, immature, and reckless. It made Shohi want to take her by the hand, show her the way, and protect her. With Rimi, he could speak selfishly, complain, and have her pamper him. He was open with her.

Shohi couldn’t imagine losing Rimi’s soft, enveloping presence. He felt like the whole reason he was able to reach out to someone else was that Rimi was there to gently hold him. He wanted to keep her by his side, love her, cherish her, and pray that someday she would embrace him fully.

“A day will come when I’ll have to make that decision. But until then, there’s a woman who I can’t give up on,” Shohi said.

Would he choose the nation’s interests and marry Aisha, or follow his heart and make Rimi his empress? If diplomatic relations with Saisakoku were going to develop, it was a choice that would have to be made.

“So ‘not yet,’ then? Are you saying you don’t know what the future holds for us?” Aisha asked.

“It seems that way,” the emperor said.

“Not yet, then. All right, Your Majesty. My very dear, respected...friend. It’s been a pleasure,” Aisha said with a carefree smile.

The princess extended a hand. Shohi tilted his head curiously.

“It’s customary in my mother’s land to clasp hands. It’s a sign of friendship,” she explained.

“I see. Well then.”

Shohi gripped her hand. Aisha squeezed the emperor’s hand, and he returned the gesture.



Rimi was happy as she watched Shohi and Aisha tightly squeeze each other’s hands, but she felt a vague sense of unease as well.

I know His Majesty doesn’t hate Aisha, and I know the same goes for her. It’s best if she joins the rear palace and becomes empress.

But Rimi knew that she was deeply important to Shohi, and she couldn’t allow her own presence to harm Konkoku. That was one thing she couldn’t let happen. The consort had made a vow to stand by his side and support him.



Very well done, Your Majesty. This will definitely leave a powerful impression.

Shusei let out a small sigh and stood from his banquet seat. He turned his back on the stage where Aisha and Shohi were and made to leave the party. Just as he was nearing one of the dimmed pathways, he heard someone call his name. It was Gulzari Shar, leaning against a darkened wall with a cup in his hand.

“Ah, Prince Shar. I hope you have a safe journey home,” Shusei said, giving an immaculate bow.

“Thank you, Shusei. I stopped you because I wanted to let you know something,” Shar said as he walked over and clapped the scholar on the shoulder. He then leaned in close to whisper, “Listen well. Saisakoku will be supporting the present emperor. This is my decision, and I speak for the crown

on such matters. My decision is final.”

“And why would you go out of your way to tell that to His Majesty’s enemy?” Shusei asked, sharply scrutinizing the prince’s smile.

“I’m sure you can figure that out on your own. By the way, I wanted to thank you for your help with Aisha. If you hadn’t been there, who knows what might have happened? I surely wouldn’t be smiling like this.”

Just how much does this man know?!

Shusei tried to keep his shock from showing. Shar gave him an amused smile and patted the scholar on the cheek before turning away. He walked with a drunken stagger, but Shusei hadn’t smelled a hint of alcohol on the man’s breath. Only a sweet, floral scent.

I see. He’s a wily one. But it’s clear now how Saisakoku will play into my plans.

Shusei turned and headed into the darkness of the night.

With Qi ending, the eyes of the government would turn inward. The most pressing matter now was the selection of the new Minister of Personnel.

The calls to select him should have reached Chancellor Shu’s ears by now.

Shusei had spent Qi making contact with everyone he could to encourage the selection of a certain candidate. The generals and ministers of Justice and War should have been floating the name by now.

How will the chancellor react when he hears Ryo Renka’s name, I wonder? Though what worries me most right now is Rimi. What will become of her position?

Diplomatic relations with Saisakoku were on the horizon. If Aisha was to join the rear palace, Rimi would be an obstacle. And the more Shohi tried to protect Rimi’s place beside him, the more danger he’d be putting her in. For Kojin and the other officials pushing for ties with Saisakoku, Rimi would be seen as nothing but a scheming enchantress, whispering in Shohi’s ear and obstructing diplomacy.

The princess’s appearance on the board has upended my plans for Rimi. I had thought she would be safe as long as she became empress.

Suddenly, Rimi's position had gone from a source of safety to a source of danger.

The Festival of Fulfillment was a grand success. The princess's dance thrilled everyone present. The food and drink were plentiful, the conversation and dancing lively. The night resounded with music and excited laughter. It was a true display of Konkoku's imperial majesty.

And so ended Qi. The next day would bring the month of Lin, and with it, the gates of Konkoku would close.



Kojin froze in place on the walkway leading from the Hall of the Rising Dragon.

"What do you mean 'His Majesty refused the princess's offer'?! Why on earth would he do that?!" the chancellor shouted at Keiyu, who had just offhandedly mentioned the news.

"I don't think shouting at me will change matters," Keiyu said, recoiling with an air of frustration. Rihan stood next to his fellow minister and eyed the chancellor with an unreadable expression.

The news had come from one of the musicians who'd heard the conversation that had taken place atop the stage. Apparently, the princess had expressed an interest in joining the rear palace, but the emperor had turned her down. Word had reached Keiyu, who in turn had dropped it into the conversation as if it were a bit of gossip.

"He just waved off the cornerstone of our future with Saisakoku in favor of some useless *girl*?!" Kojin said, shaking with fury.

"He may have sent her away, but that doesn't really mean anything right now. It's a problem for the future. There are many steps to this sort of thing," Keiyu said with a casual smile. "Besides, there was never any official discussion of whether or not Princess Aisha would marry His Majesty. It's all just an unspoken understanding at the moment. Saisakoku will likely be pleased to know that His Majesty and the princess are on good terms. Shouldn't that be enough for us as

well?”

“It is enough, but this was a chance to secure our future. If His Majesty had accepted her offer, it would’ve been like an official oath. Our bond with Saisakoku would’ve been as good as made,” Kojin moaned.

“Things will work out with Saisakoku one way or another,” Rihan said.

“Assuming nothing unforeseen happens!” Kojin snapped at the minister. “But that’s not something any of us can guarantee. When a pawn can be captured, you take the opportunity to do so. We should never have let this chance escape.”

The chancellor turned away and stormed off.

Setsu Rimi... I’d assumed you were neither poison nor cure. But you’re in the way. Am I going to have to make you disappear?

“Ryukan, are you here?” Kojin called out sharply, turning to the bushes in the garden that ran alongside the walkway.

“Yes,” came a low voice, cutting through the cicada’s cries.



Keiyu and Rihan both gave exasperated sighs as the chancellor left them behind.

“He’s furious. I didn’t think there was anything that could make Chancellor Shu that upset,” Keiyu said casually.

Rihan frowned.

“I understand wanting a sure thing, but I’m with you on this one,” Rihan said, frowning. “Things look positive with Saisakoku. I feel like this is less about wanting to secure matters with them and more about eliminating Setsu Rimi since His Majesty favors her.”

“I can’t believe we agree on something. I do question where that anger is coming from. Does he hate her, I wonder? It seems like he views her as a hated enemy despite him supporting her candidacy as empress.”

“That may be. Which would make it a personal grudge,” Rihan said softly after a moment of silence. He shook his head lightly, as if trying to shake the idea

away. “Maybe he’s upset that he hasn’t been able to find a good candidate for the Minister of Personnel. A new name started floating around this month too.”

“Oh? Whose?”

“I know something you don’t? Now there’s a surprise. It’s Ryo Renka.”

“Of course! The Beauty of Works!” Keiyu said, snapping his fingers.

“The Loony of Works,” Rihan corrected, grimacing. “It would be a nightmare having to work alongside him. Nobody knows what goes on in that man’s head.”

The two walked in silence for a moment, enduring the blistering heat that rose from the earth. Suddenly, they spotted Rimi. She was coming from the Hall of the Rising Dragon and appeared lost in thought. When she finally noticed the ministers, she halted and gave a proper bow.

“Minister of Revenue, Minister of Rites. It was a pleasure working with you this Qi,” she said.

Rihan waved his hand dismissively and frowned, contorting the scar beneath his right eye.

“Save your thanks. We’re the ones who asked for your help. But you look disappointed for someone who’s finished such an important duty,” Rihan said. He always had a threatening way of talking, but his words were considerate. Keiyu seemed shocked by the minister’s concern.

“I’ve just got a lot on my mind,” Rimi said, seemingly troubled.

“Well? Go on,” Rihan said, demanding an explanation.

“I was thinking about what the Minister of Rites said before. That I wouldn’t be able to stay in my current position if things went forward with Saisakoku. And I think he’s right. I’ve been wondering if I should really stay where I am. I think being here might be keeping His Majesty from being able to make the best choice for himself and Konkoku...” Rimi explained hesitantly.

Rihan and Keiyu exchanged glances, silently trying to decide who should answer. Rihan was the one to finally speak.

“That’s for His Majesty to worry about, not you.”

“You’re right,” Rimi said softly. She bowed once more before walking away.

As the ministers watched her depart, Keiyu turned to Rihan with a grin.

“What was that? Since when do you console women?” he asked.

Rihan spent a moment in silence before answering.

“I feel bad seeing someone without any ambitions or ill will getting tossed about like a toy. That’s all.”

“You big softie,” Keiyu said with a teasing grin as Rihan glared at him.

“You still think this is funny?”

“Shouldn’t I?” Keiyu asked, tilting his head as if he genuinely didn’t know.



A few days after the Saisakokuan delegation departed, Rimi returned to the Palace of the Water Spirit. Once she was moved in again, she went to present herself to Shohi and to let him see Tama.

“Don’t worry, a date has been set for the Nocturnal Liturgy,” the emperor said, seemingly disappointed that Rimi had been forced to return to the Palace of the Water Spirit but eager to reassure her.

However, that only made Rimi more distressed. After she left, she wandered aimlessly with Tama beneath her skirt, lost in thought. Though she was in agony, she apparently simply looked dazed.

The worry she’d felt standing beneath the stage at the Festival of Fulfillment wouldn’t leave her.

Can I really let the Nocturnal Liturgy and Celestial Request go on like this?

There was still time to find a different empress. Aisha’s arrival had Rimi questioning her own position. Was she just a burden to Konkoku? If that was the case, should she try to convince Shohi to end her enthronement?

But when she’d run into Rihan, he’d said that it wasn’t for her to worry about.

A garden separated one walkway from another, and cicadas cried incessantly from the trees there. Begonias bloomed in the shade, tucked between the trees and the wall of a building. Their heavy blossoms drooped down as if ashamed.

Tucked out of the light and with downturned heads, they seemed somehow lonely.

“Setsu Rimi.”

The voice came abruptly. The consort froze in place and turned to see Shu Kojin standing beneath a tree alongside the walkway. Dressed in his black shenyi, he looked so aloof that it was as if he was impervious to the heat.

Rimi had never been good at dealing with the icy man. Even at this moment, she found him to be a bit scary. Yet now he was beckoning her with a very rare smile.

“I’d like to talk to you. Please, come with me,” he said.

Kojin had never shown the slightest interest in Rimi, and she could count on one hand the number of times he’d personally spoken to her. The idea that he wanted to talk to her made the consort nervous. Still, with him waiting for her, she could hardly say, “No, you scare me.”

Reluctantly, she stepped down from the walkway and approached Kojin.

The cries of the cicadas overhead seemed especially loud. They were close to the Hall of the Rising Dragon, the home of the emperor, which meant the area was mostly devoid of buildings. That way, things stayed quiet and the soldiers could keep a clear lookout.

Which meant this area was quieter and more out of sight than anywhere else in the palace.

As Rimi approached Kojin, she spotted an old man kneeling behind him. He had so little presence that he almost seemed more like a shadow than a person. He flicked a glance at Rimi, and his gaze was so sharp that she felt like it might stab her.

Rimi stood before the chancellor and bowed.

“Setsu Rimi. You’ve managed to charm both Shusei and His Majesty. As a woman, you must be quite proud,” Kojin said with a thin smile.

The consort was shocked by the words and wasn’t sure how to respond. However, Kojin didn’t seem to be expecting an answer.

“Shusei’s desire for you drove him from us,” the chancellor continued coolly. “Personally, I’m disgusted by that. But what about you? Are you pleased with yourself? Satisfied?”

Rimi tried to firmly deny it, but Kojin raised a hand and cut her off before she could speak.

“And now, His Majesty is making you empress. Since he’s fond of you and you have no political backing, I thought you wouldn’t be a nuisance. I’d assumed you’d be easier to manage than any of the four consorts,” Kojin explained. “But your presence has kept Princess Aisha from joining the rear palace. This is far beyond being a nuisance. You are a poison to Konkoku.”

The chancellor took a step toward Rimi. She shrunk backward, feeling as if she’d been slapped by his icy fury.

I’m a...poison?

It was something she’d already feared. Perhaps that was why his words hit so hard.

“The court flower, gifted from Wakoku... I’d assumed you were just a weed who’d caught our fickle emperor’s eye. I’d thought you were beneath my notice.”

Suddenly, the chancellor grabbed Rimi by her collar. She was too frightened to even cry out, never having been treated like this before. All she could do was look up into Kojin’s looming eyes. She feared that if she broke eye contact, he might devour her. Despite his violent behavior, his expression was cold and motionless.

“But it turns out that the flower was poisonous this whole time,” he hissed.

Something struck Rimi in the stomach. She wasn’t even able to process that she’d been hit as her breath seized and her vision went black. The strength left her body, and Rimi’s consciousness dimmed.

I didn’t want any of this. I’m not happy about it, but...

In her fading consciousness, Rimi fumbled for words. She tried calling out to her Saigu sister who was always with her.

But even if I didn't want it...even if I'm not happy about it...is he right, Lady Saigu?

“Take her, Ryukan,” Kojin ordered, turning to the old man behind him.

The Saigu remained silent as Rimi's consciousness slipped away.

The cicadas cried and the begonias bobbed their heavy heads. All that remained in the garden was the blistering heat of the summer sun.



Afterword

Hello everyone! Miri Mikawa here.

The seasons have moved along and we're back to summer, and summer brings new meetings! By which I mean, I introduced a new girl to the story. Barring the ghost, it's a first since the four consorts in book two. Back then, I introduced three new girls at once, and they spiced things up! I hope that this new introduction did the same.

On that note, the first volume of the Culinary Chronicles manga has been released by Hakusensha. It's a wonderful, glamorous, exciting read, and I'd love it if you checked it out. You can learn more about it on Hakusensha's app, MangaPark.

As always, I'd like to thank my editor for all their support. I don't understand how you always manage to steer the story in a better direction. It's so fun getting to talk to you when I'm not working. I love our talks! I'm sorry for bothering you with all my pointless questions when you're so busy. I've been obsessed with the simple, easy meals I learned about from you. I'll do my best to avoid bothering you, keep myself fed, and write good material for you. I'm sure I'll still find ways to be a nuisance, but just bear with me.

To Kasumi Nagi, my lovely illustrator. I loved book six's cover. The way Rimi and Shohi are sitting together with Shusei behind them has such a solemn serenity. This volume's cover is great too. The expressions come through so clearly. Every time I look at it, I think about how well you capture Shohi's continued growth. We also finally get to see Kojin, Rihan, and Keiyu! Thank you for everything that you do.

And finally, to all my readers. Thank you for picking up this book. I'm so appreciative that I get to write for you and that you continue to read my work. I hope you found this volume interesting.

I'll keep doing what I can to write something good for all of you.



Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!

[Newsletter](#)

And you can read the latest chapters (like Volume 8 of this series!) by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:

[J-Novel Club Membership](#)

Copyright

Culinary Chronicles of the Court Flower: Volume 7

by Miri Mikawa

Translated by Hunter Prigg Edited by Nicole D'Andria

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © Miri Mikawa 2018

Illustrations by Kasumi Nagi

First published in Japan in 2018 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo All rights reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property.

J-Novel Club LLC

j-novel.club

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Ebook edition 1.0: September 2022

Premium E-Book